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MARY RUSSELL MITFORD

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MRS PEPYS HER BOOK

MARY RUSSELL MITFORD

HER CIRCLE AND HER BOOKS

By MARJORIE ASTIN

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LONDON
NOEL DOUGLAS

1930

“ . . . these memories are of people who are passed away like the snow in harvest . . . the lovely writers of old days, quaint creatures that they were. Merry Miss Mitford, actually living in the country, actually walking in it, loving it, and finding history enough in the life of the butcher's boy, and romance enough in the story of the miller's daughter, to occupy all her mind with, innocent of trouble concerning the Turkish question . . . and these pictures of them will be to us valuable only as the sculpture under the niches far in the shade there of the old parish church, dimly vital images of inconceivable creatures whom we shall never see the like of more.”

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My First Editor.

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JOHN RUSKIN.

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FOREWORD

STUDY of all aspects of nineteenth century life has become so popular that bonnet and shawl have assumed the picturesque qualities of powder and patches.

Mary Russell Mitford is one of the most delightful figures of the period; moreover she brings into prominence many forgotten names which will now arouse fresh interest, for it is in the works of Miss Mitford and her circle that the social student will find much valuable and entertaining detail.

INTRODUCTION

TO-DAY the name of Mary Russell Mitford is memorable only for its association with the collection of simple country tales and sketches entitled *Our Village*.

That she was a playwright who had filled Drury Lane and Covent Garden—, an author almost as well known in the States as Dickens and Thackeray—, a brilliant conversationalist and letter-writer—, these facts are in the main so little remembered that she is apt to become one of that shadowy and antique group we connect with Mrs. Barbauld and the Swan of Lichfield.

Her life held little beyond her friendships and her work; her home remained in the quiet neighbourhood of her early days; she never travelled; romance passed her by; the interest of her story is therefore mostly derived from her charm of character, which the greatest trials could not spoil or embitter. As one of her closest friends remarked, "She is like lavender, the sweeter the more it is bruised".

It would seem that the leisurely style and delicate beauties of *Our Village* had been evolved amidst the most peaceful and happy surroundings. On the contrary, however, untiring devotion to an extravagant and selfish father forced

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Miss Mitford to slave as hard at her desk as any starving book-seller's hack. Sheridan, Hood, Sir Walter Scott, Mrs. Trollope—none of these endured such harassing labour as did she during her long period of authorship, and the latter she came to regard with such aversion that she declared she would rather scrub floors, if she could have earned as much by that employment.

The simple, rustic character of her work is apt to be considered reflective of her personality, but she was endowed with such mental powers as would have graced a London salon. In her gaiety, her courage, her faculty for anecdote and illustration—she was far more akin to certain brilliant ladies of the *ancien régime* than to the majority of her contemporaries.

Charles Kingsley wrote thus of her when she was an old and crippled woman :

“I can never forget the little figure rolled up in two chairs in the little Swallowfield room, packed round with books up to the ceiling, onto the floor—the little figure with clothes on, of course, but of no recognized or recognizable pattern; and somewhere out of the upper end of the heap, gleaming under a great, deep, globular brow, two such eyes as I never, perhaps, saw in any other English

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woman—though I believe she must have had French blood in her veins, to breed such eyes and such a tongue, for the beautiful speech that came out of that ugly (it was that) face; and the glitter and depth, too, of the eyes, like live coals—perfectly honest the while, both lips and eyes—these seemed to me to be attributes of the highest French—or rather Gallic—not of the highest English—woman. In any case, she was a triumph of mind over matter; of spirit over flesh.”

Henry Chorley, the famous critic of the *Athenæum*, who moved amidst the most brilliant sections of London Society, also wrote, “It is long since I have been so pleased with anyone, whether for sweetness of voice, kindness and cheerfulness of countenance (with one look which reminds me of a look I shall meet no more), or high-bred plainness of manner. I was fascinated.”

None regarded her with a more discerning affection that did Mrs. Browning, who in a letter to Ruskin says, “I agree quite with you that she was stronger and wider in her conversation and letters than in her books. Oh, I have said so a hundred times. The heat of human sympathy seemed to bring out her powerful vitality, rust-

ling all over with laces and flowers. She seemed to think and speak stronger holding a hand—not that she required help or borrowed a word, but that the human magnetism acted on her nature as it does upon men born to speak. Perhaps if she had been a man with a man's opportunities, she would have spoken rather than written a reputation. Who can say?" . . .

From 1820 until 1854 her cottage, first at Three Mile Cross and then at Swallowfield, near Reading, was a recognized literary shrine, and it was counted as great an honour to partake of one of her strawberry teas as it was to breakfast with Rogers or spend an evening with Lady Blessington. Each visitor to Three Mile Cross carried away the memory of a tumbledown little cottage amidst a magnificent flower patch—of tiny rooms with sanded floors, stacked and lined with books, and scented by great posies of old-fashioned flowers stuck in countless quaint crocks and jars. When one had watched the plain little country-woman laughing with the village children and chatting with the farm-wives and the cobbler over the way, it was difficult to realize that she was the intimate friend and correspondent of famous men and women on both sides of the Atlantic. . . .

In his Preface to *The Oxford Book of English Prose*, Sir Arthur Quiller Couch says, ". . . it is

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curious to observe, in contrast with our poets who sing of green country all the time, what a disproportionate mass of our prose is urban, and how rarely it contrives, at its best, to get off the pavement”.

Now every page of Miss Mitford's is redolent of the fresh charms of the woods and fields, so that if one were far away and longed for English country, to read *Our Village* or *Belford Regis* would be to capture countless homely scents and sounds. Chorley has aptly called her the Claude of English village life, and he also described her as the creator of a school of minute home-landscape painters in pen and ink analogous to that of the Cuyps and Hobbimas of the Low Countries—akin to the wood-cuts of Bewick, or the etching of Read of Salisbury.

All who turned her pages became imbued with *le sentiment du vert*, and it is interesting to note the similarity of the impressions received from her writings. Ruskin said that her works possessed an indescribable perfume and sweetness, as of lily of the valley and honey, utterly unattained by any other writer. He continues, “I perhaps feel it the more from having read very little lately, except of old books, hardly any poetry, even among *them*, but much of dry history. I do not mean *dull* by ‘dry’, but dry in the sense of faded leaves, the

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scient and taste of it being as of frankincense instead of the fresh honey. I am sure that your writings will remain the type of this peculiar character of thought. They have the playfulness and purity of the *Vicar of Wakefield*, without the naughtiness of its occasional wit, or the dust of the world's great road on the other side of the hedge, as it always is there."

Mrs Browning called her "A Prose Crabbe in the Sun", and temperamental, bohemian Fanny Kemble, after she had read one of Miss Mitford's "hawthorny" sketches noted, ". . . they always carry one into fresh air and green fields, for which I am grateful to them".

A raffish Irish journalist remarked, "Mary's basket is arranged in so neat, so nice, so trim, so comely—in a word so very English a manner, that it is a perfect pleasure to see her tripping with it to market. . . ."

From the earliest days of her authorship Americans were amongst her fervent admirers, for she had given them their first intimate glimpse of English rustic life.

Miss Sedgwick, a well-known authoress in the States, told her that her books were not only reprinted and widely circulated, but that her name was familiar and honoured and loved through many a village circle, "and to the borders of the

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lonely depths of unpierced woods." Miss Mitford herself wrote of her last book *Atherton*, that the American newspapers and periodicals out-vied each other in words of praise, and that no book, for many years, had been received with such an outburst of applause. . . .

In that delightful book *Highways and Byways in Berkshire and the Cotswolds*, by P. H. Ditchfield, there are some interesting references to Three Mile Cross. The author says, "It is not a very magnificent village; there is no venerable church, no village green. There is an inn with its signpost, and about a dozen cottages, built of brick, a shop or two, and wheelwright's sheds. That is all! The house itself, where Miss Mitford lived for thirty years, is now a temperance tavern, and at the back of the house, in the garden which she loved so well, once boasting of its pinks and stocks and carnations, and its arbour not unlike a sentry-box, stands a temperance hall, fitted up with the usual unsightly accessories . . . its present appearance can only be described as disappointing. One would like to see at least one room kept as Miss Mitford kept it, packed round with books up to the ceiling, with some relics of the authoress which might be gathered together, with some portraits of her friends, Mrs. Trollope, Lady Russell, Mrs. Hofland, Miss Strickland,

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Mrs. Opie, Harriet Martineau and Mrs. Jameson, and sketches of the country she loved so well! A Mitford museum would indeed be a delightful addition to this poor modern temperance tavern."

Now there is a petrol station opposite Miss Mitford's home, and so it is only in the surrounding fields and lanes, and in Swallowfield Churchyard, where she lies buried, that one can capture something of the peaceful charm that dominates her works.

Narrow lanes they are, with untarred surfaces and luxuriant hedgerows, shaded by tall oaks and elms, and with vast green meadows on either side. These lanes form the most continuous and familiar background of her life—her favourite haunts when she could romp through them with her dogs; when, a tired woman, she escaped from the crowded cottage and sought the fresh night air. In her happier later years she trudged them with her tall staff and her flower basket, at all seasons and in all weathers. Then lastly, when she could no longer walk, she came here in her pony carriage, while others gathered flowers for her crippled eager hands.

Beyond Swallowfield Churchyard lie the lovely grounds of Swallowfield Park, and by the dividing rail stands the plain granite cross which marks her grave. Thus she lies amidst the green

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meadows she knew so well, with tall trees above her—an ideal resting place for this great nature lover. “I try to like the garden” she once wrote, “but my heart is in the fields and woods”.

MARY RUSSELL MITFORD

I

L I F E

§ I

IN one of her letters Miss Mitford says, "I may truly say that ever since I was a very young girl, I have never, although for some years living apparently in affluence, been without pecuniary care—a care that pressed upon my thoughts the last thing at night, and woke in the morning with a dreary, heavy sense of pain and pressure of something which weighed me to the earth—which I would fain cast off, but could not."

The sole source of such unhappiness was her father, whose unparalleled selfishness not only permitted him to live in idleness on her earnings, but also to gamble away every penny he could procure. The sternest upholders of filial duty were horrified at the spectacle, but remonstrance proved useless through her fanatical belief in his excellent qualities. In her eyes, his boastful extravagance was transformed into a genial generosity, his lack of prudence became a touching optimism, and his gullibility paraded itself as mere trustfulness in his fellow creatures.

Outside his family circle Dr. Mitford was

valued at his true worth. Mary's kindest friends evinced impatience at her attitude, which Henry Chorley declared she upheld with a defensive perversity and a blind credulity trenching on moral obliquity. He most justly described her life as the story of a credulous woman sacrificing herself to an utterly worthless idol.

§ II

Through his father, George Mitford was a descendant of the Mitfords of Midford Castle, near Morpeth, in Northumberland. His mother was a connection of the Grahams of Netherby.

He was educated at Newcastle School, studied Medicine at the University of Edinburgh, and was for a time a house pupil of John Hunter in London.

At twenty-five he had wasted most of his private means, but during a visit to his relation, the Dean of Winchester, he became acquainted with Miss Mary Russell, only daughter and heiress of the late Dr. Richard Russell, Rector of Overton and Ashe. Having recently lost her mother, she was living in the large house in Alresford to which they had removed after the death of Dr. Russell.

It was an opportune time for the appearance of such an ardent and handsome suitor as George

Mitford, and Mary Russell, aged thirty-five, prominent of eye and tooth, of poor complexion and diffident manner, joyously accepted his offer of marriage.

They were married at Alresford on October 17th, 1785.

Mrs. Mitford had apparently every attraction but that of beauty. She was well connected, her father being related to the Duke of Bedford; she possessed twenty-eight thousand pounds, besides considerable property, and was of so confiding a disposition that, with the exception of a sum which her father had placed with Trustees, the whole of her fortune was settled upon her husband. She was well educated, had some knowledge of the Classics, and "abounded in conversation which flowed easily in a soft and pleasant voice, from the sources of a full mind". The impression gained by reading her letters is that she shared her husband's love of social life, and that she luxuriated in the trivialities of her small-town existence.

The following is an example of her poetical powers:

"Though Mitford's absence causes many a sigh,
And tears unbidden fill his consort's eye,
Detained at Kirby waiting for his friend

Till dark November's gloomy fogs descend,
 Yet has that month to me superior charms
 To those when summer's sun our bosom warms,
 For in that month was born the friend most
 dear,

The constant partner of each joy and care;
 And faithful memory, with grateful lay
 Shall fondly hail her husband's natal day,
 etc., etc. . . ."

The Mitfords settled down in the comfortable house in Alresford, and at first the husband pursued his medical studies and took his degree, but gradually his idleness and extravagance became more evident. His plausible manner, however, always succeeded in retaining Mrs. Mitford's affectionate confidence.

They had three children, Mary being the second and only surviving one, two sons dying in infancy.

Mary Russell Mitford was born on December 16th, 1787.

§ III

From the first her father exercised a peculiar fascination over her, for he was only too glad to forsake his work to act as playmate, and allow his wits to stray in indolent pursuit of any whim of his precocious nursling.

She had not inherited any of his own good looks, being an extremely plain child, very small, a quantity of curls making her appear still more puny. She was a very clever infant, however, reading at three years old, and astonishing everyone by her studious tastes, a favourite book being *Percy's Reliques*.

When still a very young child there commenced for her that life of alternate poverty and affluence which was to extend over so many weary years, for, owing to the Doctor's debts, the family had to remove from Alresford to Reading, and thence to Lyme Regis, where George Mitford made vague plans for working hard in a new practice.

Lyme Regis was a gay place, and the Doctor prepared to combine business with pleasure by making his home at the Great House, a large mansion which had associations with Judge Jeffreys and William Pitt. It was a beautiful old place, covered with flowers and creepers, and for about a year its lofty rooms, its marble hall and long galleries made a fine setting for a constant succession of entertainments.

Then one night three trunks were smuggled through the garden, and the Mitfords fled to London, their debts being paid by the contents of the Great House. In London, Mary found that the lovely garden, the filbert walk, and the grotto

were exchanged for the neighbourhood of the King's Bench Prison.

During this time it has been said that Dr. Mitford assisted the notorious Dr. Graham with his quackeries.

On Mary's tenth birthday she and her father chanced to enter an Irish Lottery office, where she chose a ticket numbered 2224. At first there was some difficulty as to its purchase, but she refused to select any other, as 2224, when cast up, totalled her own age. The ticket was obtained, and proved to be the winner of £20,000.

In less than twenty years all that remained of it was a Wedgwood dinner service, which had been made to commemorate the event.

§ IV

The Doctor immediately bought a large house situated on the London Road in Reading, and devoted himself to a life of pleasure, his most regular pursuits being whist and coursing, at which he was remarkably unlucky.

In 1798 Mary became a pupil in a fashionable school in London. It was in Hans Place, Sloane Square, and was kept by Monsieur and Madame St. Quintin. The former had been secretary to one of the last Ambassadors of Louis Seize to the

Court of St. James and had come as an émigré to Reading, where he had taught French at the Grammar School and at the Abbey School for young ladies, which was at one time attended by Jane Austen and Mrs. Sherwood; the latter became the authoress of the *History of the Fairchild Family*.

The Abbey School was presided over by Mrs. Latournelle, whose partner St. Quintin married; finally he took it under his own management, and attained such success that he removed to London, where the pupils included the future Lady Caroline Lamb and the famous poetess L.E.L. In most accounts of this school we are reminded of Miss Twinkleton's Academy at Cloisterham, Mary's letters reflecting in the most vivid way the enthusiasms and affectations of the fashionable young lady of the day.

Thus she writes that Monsieur St. Quintin was perfectly delighted with her French letter; that her father would "‘dote on’ Metastasio, whose poetry she found ‘really heavenly’"; and she reports how Miss Essex complimented her on her singing and playing, and that Signor Parachiretti predicted that she would soon know Italian as well as she did French. She also wrote compositions on such subjects as *The Advantages of a Well Cultivated Mind*, *Balloons*, and *Amiable Manners*; "posed"

Monsieur St. Quentin in an Astronomical Lecture, and took a prominent part in the Plays and Ballets which marked the end of each term.

Her favourite teacher was Miss Fanny Rowden, who taught Italian, music, dancing and drawing. They read Virgil together, and Miss Fanny's romantic admiration for John Kemble induced her to take Mary frequently to the theatre. These visits, combined with her study of Voltaire, whom she read when she should have been practising the harp, certainly laid the foundation of her deep interest in the drama.

Miss Rowden was a poetess, and after leaving school Mary took infinite pains to bring her verses into notice, for they seemed to her to embody ". . . The polish of Rogers and the animation of Campbell."

After the St. Quintins had retired from the school it was carried on by Miss Rowden, who afterwards transferred it to the Rue d'Angoulême, Champs Elysées, in Paris. Here Fanny Kemble became a pupil, and she relates how the erstwhile gay poetess had become Methodistical, her chief interests centring in Bible readings and Pray-meetings. Miss Rowden later married the widower St. Quentin, who had inherited the title of Count.

§ V

Mary left school in December, 1802. She made her debut at the Race Ball in Reading, where she no doubt attracted attention chiefly through her reputed wealth and her studious tastes, for it must be admitted that she was uncompromisingly plain, being very short and fat, and with a wide, rosy face. She had, however, beautiful eyes and finely shaped arms and hands. She always referred in the gayest manner to her lack of beauty, asking for instance, "What, indeed, should I do at a dance, with my dumpling of a person tumbling about like a cricket ball on uneven ground, or a bowl rolling amongst nine-pins—casting off with the grace of a frisky Yorkshire cow, or going down the middle with the majesty of an overloaded hay-waggon passing through a narrow lane."

She took part, however, in all the Reading festivities, and there seemed to be prospects of still further social grandeur and advancement, for while she had been at school Dr. Mitford had bought another mansion in the neighbourhood. Gravely Court was a fine old place built in Jacobean days, but the Mitfords thought it old-fashioned and had it pulled down, erecting on the

site the large and splendid Bertram House, so named in honour of the Doctor's Norman ancestor, Sir Robert Bertram, one of the Conqueror's Knights, who had married Sibilla de Midford of Midford Castle.

It took nearly four years to build, and in the meanwhile the red-brick house on the London Road was one of the gayest in the county. Mary attended countless balls and assemblies, dinner parties and tea drinkings, but she was gradually displaying tastes which set her apart from her friends, whom she described as merely dressing to marry and marrying to dress. She read an immense number of books, was an ardent admirer of Napoleon, wrote poetry, and enjoyed long walks in the country. Nearly always she had as a pet one of her father's greyhounds, whose character and antics afforded her endless amusement.

In 1806 the Mitfords moved to Bertram House. No expense had been spared in its furnishings or decoration, but from practically the time they entered it they were hampered by debt, for Dr. Mitford was nearing the end of the last few hundreds of the lottery money, and now caused fresh anxiety by his constant visits to London, where he spent most of his days and nights at the whist tables. As early as 1807 his daughter was begging him to beware of "chance players like the Baron".

During the first year at Bertram House Mary and her father paid a visit to their wealthy relations in the North, staying with Lord and Lady Charles Aynsley at Little Harle Tower, in Northumberland.

Lady Charles was a relative of Dr. Mitford's and had married a son of the Duke of Atholl. Lord Charles called himself Aynsley as his wife had inherited property from a relation so-named. From Little Harle Tower the Mitfords visited the neighbouring gentry and places of historical interest, and Mary spent a day at Alnwick Castle, finishing with a grand dinner and ball; in honour of this occasion she had left her hair in curl papers until they reached the Castle, and had worn her ball-gown and ornaments of Scotch pebbles.

The holiday was spoilt, however, by her father suddenly journeying South in order to assist at a Reading election, leaving his daughter to apologize for all his cancelled arrangements. . . .

There were also various trips to Town, when Mary stayed in Hans Place. She went to the theatre, promenaded St. James's Street and Kensington Gardens, visited Bedlam and the Panorama, and enjoyed fruit and ices at the fashionable Grange's.

When at home she devoted much time to writing poetry, and so, in 1810, appeared *Miscellaneous Poems*. It made a favourable impression, and when the Honourable William Herbert, to whom it had been dedicated, suggested that she should write another poem, she set to work upon *Christina, or the Maid of the South Seas*. This was dedicated to Sir William Elford, a friend of Dr. Mitford's, who had expressed much admiration for her poetical efforts. Sir William was a wealthy banker in Plymouth, of considerable political, scientific and artistic attainments, and that he gladly corresponded with Mary, who was very many years younger, is an undeniable proof of her cleverness and charm.

Christina was followed by *Blanche of Castille* and *Narrative Poems on the Female Character*, dedicated to Lord Holland, the famous Whig Minister, himself an accomplished author. Then came *Watlington Hill and Weston Grove*. All were successful, especially in America, and there were many evidences that Mary was now considered a person of distinction.

During the brilliant season of 1814, when numerous Foreign Royalties and great Generals came to London to celebrate the abdication of Napoleon, she spent a pleasant holiday in Hans Place. Her poem *The March of Mind*, was recited at the

annual prize-giving at her old school, and also at the annual meeting of the British and Foreign Schools Society. On this occasion her health was proposed by Lord Lansdowne, repeated by the Duke of Kent and drunk “. . . with three times three, a flourish of drums and trumpets from the Duke of Kent’s Band, and the unanimous thunderrings and continued plaudits of five hundred people.” Wherever she went, she told her mother, she was treated quite like a little goddess.

Sometimes she stayed with the Perrys’ at Tavistock House; James Perry was the Editor of the *Morning Chronicle*, and so she was in the midst of one of the most interesting political and literary circles of the day. She was once present at a great dinner party, and was handed to her place by the Duke of Sussex. Nothing could have exceeded his civility, but Mary afterwards designated him “that royal porpoise”.

§ VII

In striking contrast to such gay scenes was the state of affairs at home.

In 1811 Dr. Mitford had actually been in prison for debt. Bertram House had been offered for sale, but merely involved its owner in a Chancery Suit; money too had been lost in the French Law

Courts in the endeavour to recover capital sunk in disastrous speculations in coal and lighting experiments. These misfortunes, combined with his continuous bad luck at cards, reduced the Mitfords to utter indigence, so that for years only two servants had been kept at Bertram House; a village lad acted as both footman, gardener and stable-boy, and the carriage horses worked on the farm.

In the great empty house, standing amidst its weedy grounds, surrounded by prying neighbours and sulky tradesmen, knowing that her father was gambling away their few remaining possessions, Mary produced the exquisite sketches which were afterwards entitled *Our Village*. This was in the autumn of 1818. They were refused by the *New Monthly Magazine*, but finally appeared in the *Ladies' Magazine*, which was then having a sale of about 250 copies; Miss Mitford's contributions soon increased this to 2,000.

It was now definitely established in her mind that she must devote her talents to earning money, so, in March, 1820, the Chancery Suit being settled at last, and Bertram House in the possession of a rich upholsterer, the Mitfords transferred the remnants of their worldly goods to Three Mile Cross, a village situated about a mile from their former home.

Instead of the splendid spaciousness of Bertram House they had now to content themselves with a dwelling which Miss Mitford described as being “. . . such as a little farmer who had made twelve or fourteen hundred pounds might retire to when he left off business to live on his means. It consists of a series of closets, the largest of which may be about eight feet square, which they call parlours and kitchens and pantries; some of them minus a corner, which has been unnaturally filched for a chimney; others deficient in half a side, which has been truncated by the shelving roof. Behind is a garden about the size of a good drawing-room, with an arbour which is a complete sentry-box of privet. On one side a public-house, on the other a village shop, and right opposite a cobbler's stall”.

Within a year or two she had converted the little garden into a wonderful flower-patch, the fame of which passed far beyond the confines of Three Mile Cross.

Happily she could derive pleasure from simple things, for henceforth her life was one of unmitigated privation and hard work, ever haunted by the fact that her earnings were insufficient to pay for her father's wilful extravagances. She often laboured eight and twelve hours a day at her desk, and was moreover responsible for the housekeeping, as her mother gradually became an invalid,

suffering from spasmodic asthma and the slow decay of her mental powers. Through all this her father relied with what she called "a blessed sanguineness on her poor efforts", and never even inquired for a situation for himself.

§ VIII

The outstanding events of the next few years were concerned with the editing of her country sketches into five volumes entitled *Our Village*, and the writing and production of her plays.

The first volume of *Our Village* appeared in 1824, and went into three editions in the space of a year. Other volumes were published at intervals, and were always received with the greatest interest and appreciation. Flowers and children were named after Mayflower, her greyhound, and the stage coachmen and postboys pointed out places mentioned by her as the chief points of local interest.

Her plays involved her in the most harassing troubles and disappointments, for though she felt constrained to devote extra care to their creation they often proved unsuitable or were at the mercy of an actor's conceit or ill temper. Her first two plays *Fiesco* and *Foscari*, after undergoing considerable revision, and being for months alternately

rejected and accepted by William Macready and Charles Kemble, were at last laid aside, but Macready had been sufficiently interested to suggest to her the outline of another play. In the autumn of 1822 she therefore began writing *Julian*.

In March, 1823, this appeared at Covent Garden with Macready in the principal rôle. It was successful and she received for it £200, a much-needed sum, as the Editor of the *Ladies' Magazine* had absconded owing her £40.

Charles Kemble had promised to produce *Foscari*, so, after inconceivable anxiety, it was performed at Covent Garden in November, 1826, and Miss Mitford was able to tell her mother that it was received with rapturous applause, and that during two Acts "the white handkerchief was going continually". In this piece appeared two of the most famous and handsome actors of the period—Charles Mayne Young and Charles Kemble. . . .

In 1825 Macready had been much interested in her play *Rienzi* but had urged her to make various alterations to it; Miss Mitford, through the advice of her friends, objected to this, but finally she agreed to do as he wished. There then was published in *Blackwood's* an article which made it appear as though Miss Mitford and her allies were criticizing Macready in a most vindictive manner.

Of course she was in no way implicated in the matter, but the irascible Macready would have nothing further to do with the play, and it was left to Kemble to produce it some three years later in October, 1828.

Rienzi was a complete triumph—all London crowded to Drury Lane, and Miss Mitford confessed that such attention had not been seen since the days of Mrs. Siddons. It not only had a splendid run at the theatre, but its sale in book form realized eight thousand copies in two months. To-day it is difficult to understand the emotion aroused by her Italian potentates and plaintive heroines ranting and drooping about their Gothic bowers and Royal Apartments. They provided great thrills to the audiences of that period, however, and Miss Mitford was received everywhere with the most flattering deference.

§ IX

The interest with which her appearance was awaited was similar to that inspired by Charlotte Brontë many years later—and both ladies excited a similar surprise. She who had produced the most dainty prose and most stirring drama—could she really be this fat, rosy little country-woman in short petticoats, stout boots, and a little, black coal-

scuttle bonnet? One could so easily picture her driving her gig to market, bargaining by the Butter Cross, and gathering simples in the sun. This impression was soon forgotten when she spoke, for the cultured speech and tone, the easy flow of conversation—provocative, sparkling—made a meeting with Miss Mitford a memorable event.

The bright face and manner gave no hint of the anxiety and overwork she endured at home. Beside those already mentioned she had written other plays, *Inez de Castro*, *Gaston de Blonderville* and *Charles I.* The latter had been refused a license owing to the danger to the State in permitting the trial of an English monarch to be represented on the stage.

She had also brought out a series of Dramatic Scenes for *Baldwin's Magazine*, was a contributor to periodicals and the fashionable Annuals, and collaborated with a friend in writing Charades for *Blackwood's*. In spite of all this work, however, her earnings could not keep pace with her father's debts, and moreover an added expense was the pony and chaise she had bought for her mother, who for some years had been in an ailing condition, and who finally became quite childish and incapable.

On Boxing Day, 1829, Mrs. Mitford had a stroke of apoplexy and died a few days later.

§ x

The following years brought no relief from drudgery, for Dr. Mitford gradually assumed a decrepit helplessness which only vanished when with his boon companions on the Reading Bench. His daughter was forced to devote hours a day to reading to him and playing cribbage, and thus much of her writing had to be done at night. Then he had taken an unaccountable aversion to her literary friends. "He hates and despises them and all their professions—looks on them with hatred and scorn, and is constantly taunting me with 'my friends' and 'my people' (as he calls them) reproaching me if I hold the slightest intercourse with author, editor, artist or actor, and treating with frank contempt everyone not of a certain station in the County. I am entirely convinced that he would consider Sir Thomas Lawrence, Sir Walter Scott, and Mrs. Siddons as his inferiors. . . . Now he ought to remember that it is not for my own pleasure, but from a sense of duty, that I have been thrown in the way of these persons; and should allow for the natural sympathy of similar pursuits and the natural wish to do the little that one so poor and powerless can do to bring merit (and that of a very high order)

into notice. It is one of the few alleviations of a destiny that is wearing down my health and mind and spirits and strength—a life spent in efforts above my powers, and which will end in the work-house, or in a Bedlam, as the body or the mind shall sink first. He ought to feel this; but he does not.”

She spent still longer and later hours at her desk. She selected and edited stories of American Life by American Authors; collaborated with a Reading musician in writing an opera libretto *Sadak and Kalasrade* (which was performed only once at the Lyceum) and a Scena entitled *Mary Queen of Scots' Farewell to France*, and also finished another play, *Otto of Wittelsbach*.

In 1834 the banned play *Charles I* appeared at the Victoria Theatre on the Surrey side of the Thames. Miss Mitford took a leading part in its production, and was rewarded by its proving completely successful; moreover she was entertained in so flattering and lavish a manner, that, as she said, even her maid was shewn everywhere as a part of herself. Her next book *Belford Regis, or Sketches of a Country Town*, increased the number of admirers, and when she again visited London in May, 1836, a friend declared he never saw anyone received with such a mixture of enthusiasm and respect—not even Madame de Stael. The Duke

of Devonshire brought her flowers, Wordsworth proved himself to be an admirer of her works, and Landor wished to paint her dog; indeed all Society was delighted to honour the brave little woman who was so sadly in need of a helping hand.

Reviews, sketches, articles, poems, another book—*Country Stories*—poured from her pen. At last she could struggle no longer, and in 1837 she applied to Melbourne for a State Pension. This was granted, but during the next year or two she was also forced to draw upon her Grandfather Russell's money in the funds, for by now she was reduced to a pitiful state of weakness, and there were long periods when her pen lay idle.

§ XI

One misfortune followed another. She had edited *Finden's Tableau* until the proprietors failed and did not pay her for completed work; and then a large sum of money had to be set aside to repair the cottage, which was showing alarming signs of damp and decay. But for her father she would thankfully have accepted an offer made by her cousin Mrs. Ragget, who wished her to become her companion and secretary. This, however, would have interfered with Dr. Mitford's "blame-

less self-importance " as Chairman of the Reading Bench."

He was now often ill, generally through his own carelessness, and she devoted most of her time to nursing and amusing him. Although he could see, he made her read aloud to him most of the morning and far into the night; she also had to play cribbage with him, and throughout that game and while she was talking or reading, he kept up a constant moaning, not from pain, as the Doctor explained, but merely from habit.

A letter she wrote to Miss Barrett in the Spring of 1842 gives a vivid description of the life she endured.

"It will help you to understand how impossible it is for me to earn money as I ought to do, when I tell you that this very day I received your dear letter, and sixteen others; that then my dear father brought into my room the newspaper to hear the ten or twelve columns of news from India, then I dined and breakfasted in one, then I got up. By that time there were three parties of people in the garden; eight others arrived soon after—some friends, some acquaintances, and some strangers; the two first classes went away, and I was forced to leave two sets of the last, being engaged to call upon

Lady Madalina Palmer, who has an old friend of both on a visit to her house. She took me some six miles (on foot) in Mr. Palmer's beautiful plantations in search of that exquisite wild-flower the buck-bean (do you know it—most beautiful of flowers? wild, or as K. . . . puts it 'tame'.) After long search we found the plant, not yet in bloom. Then I hurried home, threw my own cocoa down my throat, and read to my father Mrs. Cowley's Comedy, *Which is the Man?*, and here I am (after answering as briefly as I can, many very kind letters) talking to you.

"My father sees me greatly fatigued—much worn—losing my voice even in common conversation; and he lays it all to the last drive or walk—the only thing that keeps me alive—and tells everybody that he sees that I am killing myself by walking or driving; and he hopes that I shall at last take some little care of myself and not stir beyond the garden. Is not this the perfection of self-deception? And yet I would not awaken him from his dream—no, not for all the world—so strong a hold sometimes does a light word take of his memory and his heart—he broods over it—cries over it! No, my beloved friend, we must for the present submit. There may be some happy change. *He*

may himself wish me to go to town, and then——”

§ XII

Dr. Mitford became more intractable each week, and as his daughter could not manage him alone, a specially “strong and bony” woman was hired to assist her; it was then discovered that this person was subject to fits, and at intervals Miss Mitford and her little maid were black and blue from holding her. Finally it took five women and two men to move the invalid. Miss Mitford’s shaken nerves were rendered still worse by the first of a strange series of carriage accidents. One night in returning from Reading, whence she had gone for the Doctor, her carriage was assaulted by two footpads, who, however, were overthrown by the pony’s startled flight.

Dr. Mitford died on December 11th, 1842. Every respectful attention which was in reality paid to his daughter the latter regarded as proofs of the esteem in which he was held, but as a friend remarked, “Dr. Mitford was tolerated because she was beloved”.

He left her overwhelmed with debt; public opinion, however, decided that she had struggled long enough, and a subscription, headed by the Queen, was raised for her benefit.

It seemed as though she might now enjoy the rest and comfort which had been so persistently denied her. The cottage was still crumbling to pieces, but the Court of Chancery agreed to repair it, and while that work was in progress she took a short holiday at Bath.

Though she suffered from frequent attacks of sickness and neuralgia she was able to take long walks and spend days in Town visiting her friends. For the rest of the time, she worked in the garden and read an incredible number of French and English books. For the latter luxury she was indebted to George Lovejoy, a well-known bookseller in Reading, who not only allowed her free use of his Library but sent her every periodical and every new publication.

Another pleasure in her life was Henry, the child of her maid Kerenhappuch. The little boy was her constant companion, and there is a pleasant instance of his remembrance of his old friend after he had grown up. Miss Russell of Swallowfield Park once went to visit Miss Mitford's grave, and found a stranger beside it. "Don't you know me?" said he, "I am Henry, Ma'am. I have just come back from Australia". . . .

Let us now leave her with her books and her flowers and study various other aspects of her life.

CHARACTER

§ I

STEVENSON says that Desire and Curiosity are the two eyes through which a man sees the world in the most enchanted colours. To the very end Miss Mitford never lost these faculties, so that even when she lay dying, racked with rheumatic pains and scarcely able to draw breath, she was heard to murmur "I cling to life".

Her dominant characteristic was her love of nature. Writing to Miss Barrett she says:

"Oh, how I love those meadows, yellow with cowslips and primroses; those winding brooks, or rather *that* winding brook, golden with the water ranunculas; those Silchester coppices, clothed with wood-sorrel, wood anemone, wild hyacinth, and primroses in clusters as large as the table on which I write! I do not love musk—almost the only odour called sweet that I do not love; yet coming this evening on the night-scented odora with its beautiful green cups, I almost loved the scent for the form on which it grew. But the cowslips, the wild hyacinths, the primroses, the violet—oh, what scent may match with theirs?

I try to like the garden, but my heart is in the fields and woods. I have been in the meadows to-night—I ran away, leaving my father asleep—I could not help it. And oh, what a three hours of enjoyment we had, Flush, and the puppies, and I! I myself, I verily believe, the youngest hearted of all. Then I have been to Silchester. My father went there; and I got out and ran round the wall and coppices one way, as he drove the other. How grateful I am to that great gracious Providence who makes the most intense enjoyment the cheapest and the commonest! I do love the woods and fields! Oh! Surely all the stars under the sun, even if they were brighter than those earthly stars ever seem to me, could not compare with the green grass and the sweet flowers of this delicious season!”

She found constant pleasure and employment in her garden, and whenever possible she did her writing in the little arbour she called the sentry-box of privet. She has left so graphic a description of the garden one June that even now we seem to sense something of its perfumed warmth and colour.

She tells us that on one side was a high hedge of hawthorn, with giant trees rising above it be-

yond the hedge, whilst all down within the garden were clumps of matchless hollyhocks and splendid dahlias; the top of the garden was shut in by the old irregular cottage, with its dark brickwork covered with vines and roses, and its picturesque chimneys mingling with the bay tree, again rising into its bright and shining cone, and two old pear trees festooned with honey-suckle; the bottom of the garden and the remaining side consisted of lower hedgerows melting into wooded uplands, dotted with white cottages and patches of common. In the beds and borders were huge masses of lupins (say fifty or sixty spikes) some white, some lilac; immense clumps of the enamelled Siberian Larkspur, glittering like some enormous Chinese jar; the white and azure blossoms of the variegated monkshood, flags of all colours, roses of every shade, some covering the house and stables and overtopping the roofs, others mingling with tall apple trees, others again (especially the beautiful double Scotch rose) low but broad standing in bright relief to the blues and purples; the oriental poppy, like an orange lamp (for it really seemed to have light within it) shining amidst the deeper greens; above all the pyramid of geraniums, beautiful beyond all beauty, rose in front of their garden room, whilst each corner was filled with the same

flower, and the whole air was perfumed by honeysuckle.

One of her friends wrote of her, "She was a very Flora among her flowers; she really loved them, and enjoyed them as flowers are not always enjoyed; she treated them with a loving tenderness, not because they were 'the new kinds' but because they were old, dear friends. One rose tree I recall now—a standard, quite six feet high, I think—certainly much taller than herself, for she stood under it."

Like Dickens, her favourite flower was the geranium, and she grew some marvellous blooms. Indeed, one year the garden attained such glory that the whole parish mounted an adjacent hayrick in order to enjoy the sight.

Her love of flowers was of course widely known, and she was constantly hearing of a bloom being named after her, and generally received a first cutting. One dahlia called the Miss Mitford was sold at ten guineas a root, and two sets of climbing roses were also named the Miss Mitford and the Swallowfield.

She received many gifts of seeds. One packet came from a stranger in Madeira, in acknowledgement of the pleasure he had derived from her books during the voyage, which he had taken for health reasons. . . .

Birds and animals she loved almost as well as she did flowers, and from being a small girl she had always possessed a dog. Beginning with the great Newfoundland Coe, who used to lie down at her feet as if inviting her to mount him, there followed several of her father's greyhounds, amongst them being the matchless Mayflower of *Our Village*. Later there came smaller dogs—spaniels—Dash and Flush and Fanchon, whose adventures add to the interest of her letters.

§ II

The quaint cottage, wonderful flower garden, and brilliant social qualities of the hostess attracted numerous visitors, and we are told that Miss Mitford could give an evening party, serving nothing but tea, coffee and strawberries, and yet have half a mile of carriages at her door, which had brought the *élite* of the county families from miles around.

Her voice has been described as having a peculiar ringing sweetness in it, which rippled out sometimes like a beautiful chime of silver bells, and one friend remarked, "I never saw a woman with such an enjoyment of—I was about to say a joke, but the word is too coarse for her—of a pleasantry".

Another tribute is from a famous American scholar, who afterwards wrote of her animated conversation and great variety of anecdote, noting also that she was without any of the pretensions of an author, and devoid of the stiffness that generally belongs to ladies of her age and reputation.

She was never too tired or too busy to be interested in the smallest detail concerning others—indeed the warmth she displayed sometimes aroused unfavourable criticism. As Mrs. Browning said, she was too intensely sympathetic not to err often; that in fact it was singular (or seemed so) what faces struck her as most beautiful and what books as most excellent. “If she loved a person,” continues Mrs. Browning, “it was enough. She made mistakes one couldn’t help smiling at, till one grew serious to adore her for it. And yet when she read a book, provided it wasn’t written by a friend, edited by a friend, lent by a friend, or associated with a friend, her judgment could be fine and discriminating on most subjects, especially upon subjects connected with life and society and manners.” Miss Mitford was aware of this fault, but declared she would rather be blamed for warmth than admired for coolness, and that it was her great pleasure to love and to admire—“I never say one word more than

appears to me to be true. To be sure, there is an atmosphere of love—a sunshine of fancy—in which objects appear clearer and brighter; and from such I may sometimes paint.”

§ III

One of the most delightful accounts of her and her surroundings was that written by Richard Hengist Horne, whose affection for her was yet another proof of the interest she inspired in persons of the most diverse types and dispositions.

Before settling down to a literary career, Horne had been a midshipman in the Mexican Navy, experiencing siege and ship-wreck, fire and mutiny. He was author, poet, musician, and traveller, and published books on numerous subjects, including the famous *Orion, an Epic Poem in Six Books*.

A friend of Mrs. Browning, it was through her that he became acquainted with Miss Mitford, who asked him to contribute to one of her *Annals*. The following reminiscences bring her so vividly before us that we give them in full:

“It was a comfortable-looking, but still a real village cottage, with no town or suburb look whatever about it. Small lattice windows, below and above, with roses and jasmine creeping round

them all, established its rural character; and there was a great buttress of a chimney rising from the ground at the garden-strip side, which was completely covered with a very ancient and very fine apricot tree. There the birds delighted to sit and sing among the leaves, and build too, in several snug nooks, and there in early autumn the wasps used to bite and bore into the rich brown cracks of the largest apricots, and would issue forth in rage when any one of the sweetest of their property was brought down to the earth by the aid of a clothes prop, guided by the superintending instructions of a venerable little gentlewoman in a garden-bonnet and shawl, with silver hair, very bright hazel eyes, and a rose-red smiling countenance. Altogether, it was one of the brightest faces anyone ever saw.

“‘Now, my dear friend,’ would she say, ‘if you will only attend to my advice, you will get that apricot up there, which is quite in perfection. I have had my eye upon it these last three weeks, wondering nobody stole it. The boys often get over into the garden before any of us are up. There now, collect all those leaves, if you will be so good—and those too—and lay them all in a heap just underneath, so that the apricot may fall upon them. If you don’t do that, it will burst open with a thump. There! now

push the prop up slowly, so as to break the apricot from the stalk; and when it is down, do not be in too great a hurry to take it up, as it's sure to have a good large wasp or two inside. Wasps are capital judges of ripe wall-fruit, as my dear father used to say. A little lower with the prop! More to the left—now push the prong upwards, and gently lift—again—down it comes! Mind the wasps! three, four—mind!—perhaps that's not all—five!—I told you so!'

“‘How angry they are!’

“‘Not more, my dear friend, than you or I would have been under similar circumstances.’”

“I had not known Miss Mitford very long at this time; but it was her habit to address all those with whom she was on intimate terms, by some affectionate expression. For several years, however, I used to pay a visit of a week or ten days to Miss Mitford's cottage during the strawberry season, and again during the middle of summer, when her show of geraniums (she resisted all new nomenclatures) was at its height, and sometimes later when the wonderful old fruit trees just retained some half-dozen of their choicest treasures. It would be impossible for any engraving or photograph, however excellent as to features, to convey a true likeness of Mary Russell Mitford. During one of these visits Miss Charlotte Cushman

was also staying at the cottage, and exclaimed the first time Miss Mitford left the room, 'What a bright face it is.' This effect of summer brightness all over the countenance was quite remarkable. A floral flush overspread the whole face, which seemed to carry its own light with it, for it was the same indoors as out. The silver hair shone, the forehead shone, the cheeks shone, and above all the eyes shone. The expression was entirely genial, cognoscitive, beneficent. The outline of the face was an oblate round, of no very marked significance beyond that of an apple, or other rural 'character'; in fact, it was very like a rosy apple in the sun. Always excepting the forehead and chin. The forehead was not only massive, but built in a way that sculpture only could adequately delineate. Miss Barrett, in a note to a friend concerning Miss Mitford, described her forehead as of the ancient Greek type, and compared it to her idea of *Akinetos*, or the Great Unmoved, although we may doubt whether the amiable authoress of *Our Village* would have felt very much pleased or complimented by the unexpected comparison. Howbeit, this brain structure accounted to me for the fact that Miss Mitford's conversation was often very superior to anything in her books. Having on occasion suggested this, she said, smiling, 'Well, you see, my

dear friend, we must take the world as we find it, and it doesn't do to say to everybody, all that you would say to one here and there'. And presently afterwards, when alluding to several persons, without mentioning any names, for she was a very politic lady of the old school, Miss Mitford, added, 'One has to think twice before speaking once, in order to come down to them; like talking to children.'

"This build of head, and strong outline of head and face, will go far to explain the strength of character displayed by Miss Mitford during the early and most trying periods of her life, with her extravagant and selfish father. It may also equally account for her general composure and presence of mind, both on great occasions and others, trifling enough to talk and write about, but of a kind to test the nerves of most ladies.

"For instance in driving Miss Mitford one day in her little pony-chaise on a morning visit, she so riveted my attention on the special point of a story, that I allowed one wheel to run into a dry ditch at the road side, and the pony and chaise must of course have turned over, but that we were 'brought up' by the hedge. 'Hillo! my dear friend!' said Miss Mitford, 'we must get out.' We did so; the little trap was at once put on its proper course, and without one word of comment,

the bright-faced old lady took up the thread of her discourse."

§ IV

She was the firm friend of all the humble folk at Three Mile Cross, and the village children used to bow and curtsy to her as she sat at the window of her upstairs study.

Some time after her death two friends came to look at the deserted cottage at Three Mile Cross, and chatted with the owner of the village shop.

"Yes," said he, "that was her house, the very next door: everyone called it small and ugly and inconvenient, but *she* liked it—she made herself and everybody else happy in it." He also remarked that he could repeat every word she had written on it.

The following extract from one of her letters will illustrate the interest she took in her neighbours. "I must tell you a pretty thing that has happened close by. The journeyman of our neighbour the shoe-maker has caught my love of flowers, and having borrowed of his brother the blacksmith a little bit of waste ground by the forge, behind some poplars which draw all the nourishment from the earth, so that they could not raise cabbages there, planted it with seedling dahlias (about two hundred), which he used to

water night and morning with a *can*, which he carried, backward and forward from the pond at the top of the street. Well, he has got the best seedling of the year, the very best. It happened to be in bloom in time for the last Reading Show; gained, of course, the cottagers' prize, and he will get something between £5 and £10 for the root, besides the honour. I never, I think, saw such a happy face in my life as his at the Flower Show. He never stirred from his flower. All the gardeners far and near (for it was a grand dahlia show open to all England, and we had twelve prizes for strangers, and they came from beyond London) clustered about him; and John Brown and his dahlia were the lions of the day. I think I enjoyed it as much as he did; his love of flowers was so genuine, and his success so entirely deserved."

When the Queen visited the Duke of Wellington at Strathfieldsaye, Miss Mitford was determined that the children should see her Majesty take leave of her host, so two hundred and ninety small villagers were provided with pink and white flags, and packed into waggons lent by the farmers. Miss Mitford led the procession, in company with a few of the gentry, and she was followed by a crowd of big boys, who seeing her walk, had refused to ride.

The Royal visitor said farewell just in front of the waggons, which then returned to Miss Mitford's cottage, where the gentlefolk had sandwiches, cake and wine, and the children had each a bun ". . . as large as a soup plate, made doubly nice as well as doubly large", a glass of wine and a mug of ale. . . .

On the first of September, 1842, was laid the first stone of the Reading Reading Room, and Miss Mitford attended the ceremony. Afterwards she wrote, "If ever I am ungrateful enough to bemoan my isolated position, I ought to think over the assemblage in the morning, and at the evening tea-party and concert (where my father insisted on my appearing for an hour), in order to feel the thankfulness that thrilled through my very heart at the true and honest kindness with which I was received. It was an enthusiasm of man, woman and child—hundreds—thousands—such as I can hardly venture to describe, and it lasted all the time I stayed. Indeed, the pleasure amounted to pain, so confusing was it to hear the over-praise of which I felt myself unworthy. But it was not the praise that was so touching, it was the kindliness, the affection. My father cried, K—— cried, Dora Smith cried, I think more than all, at the true, honest, generous heartiness of the people."

§ v

In Blackwood's *Edinburgh Magazine* the famous Christopher North wrote an article on the authoress of *Our Village* in which he said, "The young gentlemen of England should be ashamed o'themselves fo' lettin' her name be Mitford. They should marry her whether she will or no, for she would mak both a useful and agreeable wife. That's the best creetishism of her warks."

Miss Mitford's views on matrimony, however, were at that time considered rather original, for she strongly disapproved of the prevailing dictum of marriage at any price. She says, "I am completely and entirely of F——'s mind about marriages; they are the most foolish things under the sun; I saw a dear friend of mine lately 'exchange her maiden gladness for a home and for a ring', and really I would as soon have followed her funeral—a sweet woman with everything to make her happy, a good fortune, affectionate relations, troops of friends, and more admirers than she knew what to do with, marrying one of the most disagreeable men in the world, apparently given no other motive than to be called Mrs. instead of Miss. It is lucky that everyone does cry at weddings, for I am sure that I could not have helped

it. There is to me no sight so melancholy; and where there is no money the thing is worse still."

Again she writes, "I agree with Miss Edgeworth in thinking juxtaposition sovereign in match-making, though I do not agree with her that it is of any effect in love—except, indeed, with those very sighing damsels who cannot keep their hearts while they walk up street, and so are forced to leave them with their next door neighbours. But it is my theory (I beg you to observe, my dear friend, that theory and practice are two very different things)—it is my theory, then, that love never flowers so luxuriantly as when distance and difference, of fortune or of station, give full scope to the imagination. A castle or a cottage; a prince or a peasant; a Swede or an Italian; may all give play to the poetry of the heart; but to fall in love with a stupid man who lives in the next town, in a brick house, with a walled-in garden—whose father and mother, grandfather and grandmother, aunts and brothers you have been tired of all your life—to fall in love with such a man as that is really more than impossible."

§ VI

Miss Mitford once told Sir William Elford that reading was her favourite mode of idleness, and

that she liked it better than fir-coning, violetting, working gown-tails, playing with her dog or feeding the kitten, or riding in a gig.

Despite her incessant occupations of writing, housekeeping and nursing, she managed to read a great deal. She was a true book-woman. "Besides books long in themselves," she wrote, "I love large collections of works of the same class. Shakespeare I had always known, of course. But what joy it was to wander at will through the vellum bound folio of Beaumont and Fletcher, and to diverge to Ben Jonson, to Massinger, to Ford, to Webster, and the countless riches of Dodsley's Old Plays! How pleasant to get together books united only by a common subject, collections of English ballads, Percy, Weber, Heber, Ritson, Scott, the Chronicles of Froissart and de Joinville, of Hollinshed and of Hall, the endless Memoirs of Louis the Fourteenth's day, or the still more endless Journals and Diaries, whether by prince or valet, whether false or true, that show us vividly as in life him whom Beranger has called the great poet of modern times, 'Marvellous Napoleon'.

"Or again, books by the same authors; the novels of Richardson; the letters of Walpole—will they ever come to an end—I hope not. The majestic verse and graceful prose of Dryden whose

prefaces contain some of our earliest criticism and some of our best: the wisdom of Bacon; the wit of Swift; the easy truth of Jane Austen, the matchless charm of Scott. I have read Prynne and Defoe more than would break down a writing table—and about the French Revolution as much as would fill a room. . . .

“One winter I revelled in all the lore I could procure regarding beasts and birds, and insects, and reptiles; another I solaced myself with a course of topography, ponderous county histories which are called so dull and are often so amusing, full of odd bits of legend and story and traits of manners that one finds nowhere else; and once by looking through the whole series of the *Monthly Review*, reading the contemporary judgements on Hume and Robertson, on Gibbon and Johnson, on Fielding and Smollett, on Gray and Mason, on Goldsmith and Sterne, and comparing the criticism of the day with the abiding verdict of posterity.”

Pepys and Evelyn were great favourites—though she considered the latter “. . . too precise, too gentlemanly, and too sensible by half; wrote in full dress with an eye, if not to the Press, at least to posthumous reputation.” Of Samuel she says, “Now this man sets down his thoughts in a most becoming *déshabillé*—does not

care two-pence for posterity, and evidently thinks wisdom a very foolish thing. I don't know when any book has amused me so much. It is the very perfection of gossiping—most relishing nonsense."

She had a library of nearly six thousand books, and constantly received gifts from friends and strangers, so that as well as re-reading the old authors she was conversant with most of the current literature. She had also a wide knowledge of French writers, reading them in the original as easily as she did English. Balzac was a special favourite, and she declared that had she had the time, she would have liked to have tried her hand at translating one of his books.

FRIENDS

§ I

SPEAKING of literary women Miss Mitford said, "I never met one in my life (except Miss Jane Porter, and she is rather *passée*) that might not have served for a scare-crow to keep the birds from the cherries."

One of her earliest friends was Mrs. Trollope, whose father had been Vicar of Heckfield, and who therefore had been a near neighbour of the Mitfords. The sprightly Fanny had always expressed the greatest affection and admiration for Miss Mitford, especially for her plays, and when present at *Foscari* had "cried herself half blind". Although immersed in a busy family life and much financial worry at the unsuccessful farm "Julians" near Harrow, Mrs. Trollope took the utmost trouble to interest Macready in *Rienzi*, and finally it was through her that arrangements were made to take that play to the States.

When she went to America to conduct her ill-fated Bazaar she found time to write to Three Mile Cross, retailing such cheering news as the following, dated from New York, May 29th, 1831. . . . "It is here, and here only, that I have had an opportunity of seeing *Rienzi*; it is a noble

tragedy, and not even the bad acting of the Chatham Theatre could spoil it. I never witnessed such a triumph of powerful poetry over weak acting as in the magnificent scene where Rienzi refuses pardon to an Orsini; the narrative of the mother and her babes drew tears from American eyes, albeit unused (God knows) to any mood of deep feeling."

This same letter is of considerable interest inasmuch as it resulted in the publishing of the famous *Domestic Manners of the Americans*. She commences it thus:

"I write to you, my dear friend, almost on the eve of departure, and would rather have done so on the eve of my arrival in my own dear land, were it not that I wish to propitiate your assistance in the business that must occupy me immediately on my arrival. I ask for it frankly, and frankly must you refuse should granting it include any inconvenience which my ignorance prevents my foreseeing—of this yourself only can be the judge. You know, I believe, that I have looked and listened since I have been here with a view to publication, and you know also, dear friend—for how can you help it?—that I am as utterly unknown in the world of letters as your dog May was before you immortalized

him. What I would ask is such a letter of introduction to your publisher as would enable me to present myself before him although feeling as if I had dropped upon him from the moon. . . . I am well aware that it is difficult to bring a first effort to the light, but I think your powerful name will help me much."

Miss Mitford complied with this request, and Mrs. Trollope's startling book was published a few months after her return to England.

Miss Mitford described her as being a lively, brilliant woman of the world, with a warm heart, and a cordial manner. With regard to her books, however, she regretted her "terrible coarseness", but admitted that she had done two or three marvellously clever things.

§ II

A friendship which dated from Bertram House days was with Barbara Hofland, a noted authoress and poetess, whose books sold in their thousands, and who numbered Queen Charlotte amongst her admirers. One of her most popular poems was that written on the occasion of the marriage of Queen Victoria. It is an interesting example of the prevailing fashion in poetry. Prince Albert speaks:

“The pomp, the pageantry, the crowd are fled,—
 Now may I press thee freely to my heart,
 Dismiss the deep solicitude—the dread
 Love to his votaries ever must impart,
 Till the last knot is tied—the blessing given,
 And each receives the bright boon of Heaven.

Now may I look into those dove-like eyes,
 And read my welcome in their tender light;
 Gaze like a miser on my peerless prize,
 Or, with the poet’s pure, supreme delight,
 Through time’s long vista see my joys expand
 Blest in thy love, and proud of thy com-
 mand. . . .”

The last verse concludes :

“Yet think not, Royal Maid, thy Albert asks,
 The time, the preference, duty may decry;
 Thy power and greatness have their sacred
 tasks;
 But if the heart’s fond homage can supply
 By love—unalterable love—the power
 To sweeten all—such love now is thy
 dower. . . .”

The daughter of a Sheffield manufacturer, she
 became the wife of Bradshaw Hoole, a Sheffield

merchant, who died two years later, leaving her to support herself, as property was lost through the failure of the firm in which it was invested. The publication of a book of poems enabled her to establish a school in Harrogate, and then in 1808 she married Thomas Hofland, an artist, who afterwards attained considerable success in his profession. After residing some time in Knaresborough they removed to London, where their home in Newman Street became a well-known meeting place of many literary and artistic people. Money was scarce, however, and Mrs. Hofland continued to write, her most famous book being *The Son of a Genius*.

Miss Mitford stayed with them when her *Rienzi* was about to appear at Drury Lane, and it was during this visit that she met Mr. and Mrs. S. C. Hall, who were popular authors and editors of various newspapers and Annuals. Mrs. Hall declared that her *Sketches of Irish Character* were suggested by *Our Village*.

She has left an interesting account of her meeting with Miss Mitford. Before the latter appeared, Mrs. Hofland proffered a few introductory remarks. "Mary is a little grand and stilted just now, there is no doubt the tragedy will be a great success; they all say so in the green room; and Macready told me it was a wonderful tragedy—

an extraordinary tragedy, 'for a woman to have written'. The men always make that reservation my dear; they cramp us, my dear, and then reproach us with our lameness; but Mary did not hear it, and I did not tell her. She is supremely happy just now, and so is her father, the doctor.

"Yes, it is no wonder that she should be a little stilted—such grand people coming to call and invite them to dinner, and all the folk at the theatre down-upon knees to her—it is such a contrast to her life at Three Mile Cross."

One can sense the stirring of claws in that little speech.

Mrs. Hall was amused at Mary's quaint ways and attitudes, but recorded that, "She was always pleasant to look at, and had her face not been cast in so broad—so 'outspread'—a mould, she would have been handsome; even with that disadvantage if her figure had been tall enough to carry her head with dignity, she would have been so, but she was most vexatiously 'dumpy', but when Miss Mitford spoke, the awkward effect vanished—her pleasant voice, her beaming eyes and smiles, made you forget the wide expanse of face; and the roly-poly figure, when seated did not appear really short."

§ III

Amongst the many famous London hostesses who delighted to entertain Miss Mitford was Lady Dacre, a distant relation of Dr. Mitford's. Her father was Admiral Sir Chaloner Ogle, her mother a daughter of John Thorne, Bishop of Winchester. A brilliant Italian scholar, her version of Petrarch's sonnets was greatly admired. She also published various other translations, wrote dramas, and was a clever artist and modeller.

It was at Lady Dacre's that Miss Mitford became acquainted with Joanna Baillie. She was much attracted by the learned and pleasant old poetess, whose name she afterwards took for one of her finest geraniums.

Another poetess whom she regarded with affection was Miss Eleanor Ann Porden, who became the wife of the famous explorer John Franklin.

Miss Porden wrote *The Veils, or a Triumph of Constancy*, and *Cœur de Lion; an epic poem in 16 Cantos*. Miss Mitford had received the latter for review, and soon afterwards met the poetess at an evening party. "She is a very pleasant young woman," she wrote, "rather affected at first sight—at least people take her for affected, because she has a Lord Burleigh-ish way of shaking

her head, and uses more action than is common in an English lady; but her conversation is very earnest and natural." They became intimate friends, and it was when they were discussing subjects for a new play that *Rienzi* was first mentioned.

Miss Porden married John Franklin in 1822, after his return from his first expedition to Arctic America. The birth of her little girl brought on a decline, and she died six days after her husband had set out on his second North American trip; Franklin received the news when at Lake Huron. A Union Jack which she had worked and which had been shown to Miss Mitford was placed on an island in the Mackenzie. . . .

Miss Susanna Strickland, sister of the famous Agnes, the authoress of the *Queens of England*, was amongst the many who sent admiring verses to Three Mile Cross. She commenced her poem thus:

"Thy 'sister' poetess, thou gifted one!
 Never for me will lyre like thine be strung;
 Never to me will nature teach the art
 To sketch the living portrait on the heart; . . ."

§ IV

Two of the most prolific and popular writers of
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the nineteenth century were William and Mary Howitt, who for a considerable number of years published books on history, travel, nature study, poetry and fiction;—in all, their united efforts numbered 110 works. They were both Quakers, and in their first years of married life had kept a Chemist's shop in Nottingham, where every spare moment was given to acquiring knowledge and writing poetry. Ultimately they devoted themselves entirely to authorship, and Mary Howitt wrote numerous books for children, translated some of Hans Andersen's tales and also the novels of Fredericka Bremer. She was thus the first to introduce that famous writer to English readers.

Both she and her husband were great admirers of *Our Village*, and she presented one of her own books to Miss Mitford as an excuse to address her. William Howitt occasionally reviewed Miss Mitford's works, and wrote an interesting account in the *Athenæum* of a visit to Three Mile Cross. . . .

Miss Mitford only once met the brilliant and sententious Harriet Martineau, when the latter was living in Fludyer Street and enjoying great popularity as the authoress of the famous political economy stories.

Miss Mitford was at first attracted by her, but

there ensued little intercourse between them, as interests and friends were widely different. Miss Martineau was not favourably impressed by her visitor; nevertheless she always wrote kindly and justly of her works, as when she said, "Miss Mitford's descriptions of scenery, brutes, and human beings have such singular merit, that she may be regarded as the founder of a new style; and if the freshness wore off with time, there was much more than a compensation in the fine spirit of resignation and cheerfulness which breathed through everything she wrote, and endeared her as a suffering friend to thousands who formerly regarded her only as a most entertaining stranger."

Miss Mitford also only once met Maria Edgeworth. It was at an Assembly, and she thought Miss Edgeworth the smallest woman she had ever seen.

§ v

Mrs. Hemans was an occasional correspondent. Towards the latter part of her life she found the greatest enjoyment in the writings of Gilpin and White of Selborne, and Miss Mitford, and the Howitts, calling these her "green books", and her sister related how, shortly before she died, the

sweet scenes of *Our Village* rose in visions before her. It had been one of her plans to write a little volume of prose sketches, chiefly consisting of recollections of her childhood, and descriptions of scenes that had struck her in after life, and this volume she meant to dedicate to Miss Mitford.

Mrs. Opie was an old and valued friend, and at the time when the public subscription was being raised for Miss Mitford, she took a leading part in collecting large funds for it.

Other writers well known to Miss Mitford were Mrs. Jameson, Mrs. Acton Tindall, and Mrs. Archer Clive.

To-day Mrs. Jameson is remembered more for her association with the Browning honeymoon than for any of her books, which included guides to public and private Art Galleries and a *History of Sacred and Legendary Art*.

Mrs. Acton Tindall was a wealthy heiress; her husband was partner to his father, a rich solicitor of Aylesbury. She wrote ballads on historical and devotional subjects.

Mrs. Archer Clive, whose husband later became Chancellor and Prebendary of Hereford Cathedral, was the authoress of the sensational novel *Paul Ferroll*.

§ VI

The famous and flighty poetess L.E.L. (Letitia Elizabeth Landon) had once rather cruelly described Miss Mitford as "Sancho Panza in petticoats". After L.E.L.'s tragic death at Cape Coast Castle Miss Mitford had a kindly word for her, for she says in a letter to a friend—"You will find Mr. Blanchard speaking of me as a friend of Miss Landon's. I only saw her once, and she having written to me 'My dear Miss Mitford', and apologized for so-doing, because she could not help it. I said, of course, that I did not consider her a stranger. This claim proves that she was not rich in female friends. I am glad, poor and powerless as I am, that I did write to her kindly".

This last reflection would have occurred to her again had she known more of the inner life of Charlotte Brontë, to whom she had written a note of appreciation. In reply she received "a charming letter". She was a great admirer of the Yorkshire novels, and shared to the full the prevailing curiosity as to their authorship, exchanging with Mrs. Browning numerous conjectures and criticisms. She preferred Shirley to Jane Eyre. "It has not the melodramatic interest", she wrote, "and is all the better for the want of it; but to me

it seems a racy, poignant, pungent book—and with one admirable character, Shirely herself. None but a woman would have made so fine a portrait of a self-willed, spoilt, charming creature who gives her heart to the only being whom she ever learnt to fear and look up to. No man of equal ability would have made love the be-all and end-all of life. It must be a woman. Besides, there is governess French in it, and a thousand small indications which you will find in reading; among others she gives the sort of social predominance to the clergy (writing of a manufacturing district among mill-owners and great squires) which women who claim as their own would do, and men would not”.

§ VII

Names which occur frequently in her correspondence are those of Marianne Skerrett who held a position at Court, being superintendent of the Queen's dressers; Miss Goldsmid, the daughter of Sir Isaac Lyon Goldsmid, the well-known Jewish philanthropist and financier; and Miss Emily Jephson, who had been brought up in the Edgeworth family, and was a niece of Jephson the Irish dramatist.

There were many others also who, possessing great wealth or marked literary tastes and talents,

were attracted by her books, and had ventured to write to her, and had then become regular correspondents. Such were Mrs. Hoare, of Monks-town, Ireland, and Mrs. Jennings, Mrs. Dickenson, Mrs. Partridge and Mrs. Ouvry, the last-named being wife of the Rector of Wing, near Aylesbury. One of her most interesting friends was Mrs. Cockburn, the wife of an Edinburgh wine merchant. As the eight-year-old Mary Duff, she had been Byron's "first love". It was she who introduced John Ruskin to Miss Mitford.

MRS. BROWNING

§ I

IN common with many other people Miss Mitford owed numerous kindnesses to the wealthy and genial dilettante John Kenyon, "the idealized Pickwick", who has been described as the untiring friend of half the literary men of note from Coleridge to Browning. John Kenyon was related to the Barrett's, and it was through him that Robert Browning became acquainted with his future wife.

During Miss Mitford's visit to London in May, 1836, he took her to see the Giraffes and the Diorama, and writing of this occasion to her father she says: "A sweet young woman, whom we called for in Gloucester Place, went with us—a Miss Barrett—who reads Greek as I do French, and has published some translations of Aeschylus, and some most striking poems. She is a delightful young creature; shy and timid and modest. Nothing but her desire to see me got her out at all, but now she is coming to us to-morrow night also."

Miss Barrett later accompanied Miss Mitford and Wordsworth on a visit to Chiswick; indeed she seems to have seen Miss Mitford almost every

day of the latter's stay in Town, and when the time came for them to separate there was a mutual agreement to correspond.

There is no doubt that it was due to the elder woman that the friendship became one of such intimacy. They had many tastes in common—books and flowers, French writers and Louis Napoleon, but Elizabeth Barrett sometimes shrank from Miss Mitford's demonstrative nature, her sensitive mind of the former being more prone to tolerate and analyse.

When Dr. Mitford was dying, Elizabeth Barrett wrote to a friend, "There is nothing more various in character, nothing which distinguishes one human being from another more strikingly than the expression of feeling, the manner in which it influences the outward man. If I were in her circumstances, I should sit paralysed—it would be impossible to me to write or to cry. And she, who lives and feels with the intensity of a nature warm in everything, seems to turn to sympathy by the very instinct of grief, and sits at the death-bed of her last relative, writing there in letter after letter, every symptom, physical and moral—even the very words of the raving of a delirium, and those heart-breaking words! I could not write such letters, but I know she feels as deeply as any mourner in the world can".

And again, “. . . She sees the whole world in stripes of black and white, it is her way. I feel very affectionately towards her, love her sincerely. She is affectionate to *me* beyond measure. Still, always I feel that if I were to vex her, the lower deep below the lowest deep would not be low enough for *me*. I always feel *that*. She would advertise me directly for a wretch proper”. After Elizabeth Barrett became a confirmed invalid Miss Mitford’s visits were like gleams of sunshine amidst the gloom of Wimpole Street; so too were the presents of fruit and flowers, and the long letters full of country gossip. One of the most precious gifts was the little dog Flush, who appears so often in all the Browning correspondence. Only John Kenyon shared such intimacy as did “dearest Miss Mitford” who was “sprinkled, as to the soul, with meadow dews.”

The appearance of Robert Browning caused Elizabeth to regard her old friend with much less interest, for Miss Mitford’s visits frequently interfered with those of the poet and involved an agitated rearrangement of dates and hours; then, too, Elizabeth, enwrapped in the palpitating delights of a new sexual life, found it difficult to listen patiently to village gossip and literary news, especially as Browning’s name was never mentioned, Miss Mitford finding his poetry “obscure”. She had,

however, been the first to attract Elizabeth's notice to the beauty of *Pippa Passes*.

Writing to Browning in November, 1845, Elizabeth says, "All day to-day, Friday, Miss Mitford has been here! She came at two and went away at seven—and I feel as if I had been making a five-hour speech on the corn-laws in Harriet Martineau's parliament;—so tired I am. Not that dear Miss Mitford did not talk both for me and herself,—for that, of course she did. But I was forced to answer once every ten minutes at least—and Flush, my usual companion, does not exact so much—and so I am tired, and come to rest myself on this paper. Your name was not once spoken to-day; a little from my good fencing: when I saw you at the end of an alley of associations, I pushed the conversation up the next because I was afraid of questions such as every moment I expected, with a pair of woman's eyes behind them; and those are worse than Mr. Kenyon's, when he puts on his spectacles. So your name was not once spoken—not thought of, I do not say—perhaps when I once lost her at Chevy Chase and found her suddenly with Isidore the Queen's hairdresser, my thoughts might have wandered off to you and your unanswered letter while she passed gradually from that to this—I am not sure of the contrary".

Months later the same state of things existed,

and Elizabeth again confides to her lover. "Dear Miss Mitford came at two to-day and stayed until seven, and all those hours you were not once mentioned—I had not courage—and she perhaps avoided an old subject of controversy. . . . I do not know. It is singular that for this year past you are not mentioned between us, while other names come up like grass in the rain. No single person will be more utterly confounded than she, when she comes to be aware of what you are to me now—and *that* I was thinking to-day, while she talked to never a listener. She will be confounded, and angry perhaps—it will be beyond her sympathies—or if they reach so far, the effort to make them do so will prove a more lively affection for me, than, with all my trust in her goodness, I dare count on. Yet very good and kind and tender she was to me to-day. And very variously intelligent and agreeable . . . you would certainly call her superior to her own books—certainly you would. She walks strongly on her two feet in this world—but nobody shall see her (not even *you*) fly out of a window. Too closely she keeps to the ground, I always feel."

Again she says, "To-morrow morning Miss Mitford comes to spend the day like the dear kind friend she is; and I, not the least in the world glad to see her! Why have you turned my heart into

such hard porphyry? Once, when it was plain clay, every finger (of these womanly fingers) left a mark on it—and now . . . you see!”

No doubt Miss Mitford had noticed those strange silences, but hesitated to do anything that might alter the relationship between them, meddling with nothing she could not understand, and cherishing the affection she still possessed.

But when in September, 1846, the escape from the sick-room had been effected, when speeding away into the southern sunshine with her husband and her friends, Elizabeth remembered Miss Mitford with her former affection, especially as there had come a letter to Orleans in which Miss Mitford said that she would have “gone to the Church”.

Mrs. Browning wrote a long letter en route from Orleans to Lyons and concluded thus, “Now you will write—I feel my way on the paper to write this. Nothing is changed between us, nothing can ever interfere with sacred confidences, remember I do not show letters, you need not fear my turning traitress. . . . Pray for me, dearest friend, that the bitterness of old affections may not be too bitter for me, and that God may turn those salt waters sweet again.

“Pray for your grateful and loving

“E.B.B.”

Hearing that Elizabeth's honeymoon had not only improved but transformed her, Miss Mitford declared that that fact had made her a friend of Robert Browning. She had only once met the poet—at the dinner party given by her friend Sergeant Talfound to celebrate the production of his play of *Ion*.

During the Brownings' long sojourn in Italy she was kept fully informed of their experiences, and she confessed that it made her long for a magic carpet when she heard of Florence's "garden-ground of vineyards and olive trees sung round by nightingales"—of walks where the golden oranges looked over the walls—and of husband and wife sitting under the moon in the great piazza of St. Mark, "sipping excellent coffee and reading the French newspapers". The Brownings said that her letters came so regularly to the hour that when it struck without them, they asked why.

Miss Mitford did not always approve of her friend's new interests, being specially disturbed at Mrs. Browning's professed belief in spiritualism; one can almost hear the hushed voice and see the raised hands as she exclaims in her letters, "Fancy Mrs. Browning thinking Louis Napoleon ought to take up the cause of those wretched Italians", and "Only think of Mrs. Browning giving the most

unlimited credence to every 'rapping' story which anyone can tell her. . . ."

When the Brownings came on a visit to England, Miss Mitford met them in London. She thought their son Penini was a pretty little boy, "but it was odd to hear the English parents and the English nurse talking to him in Italian. I suppose next year they will all talk to him in French, and when English will take its turn, God knows."

In 1840, Mrs. Browning's brother Edward had been drowned in Tor Bay, but details of the tragedy had not been revealed to the public until Miss Mitford referred to it in an article on Mrs. Browning in her *Recollections of a Literary Life*. When she heard of the disclosure, Mrs. Browning was terribly upset, and there ensued an agitated correspondence between them, Miss Mitford declaring that she had rather her whole book had perished than that it should have given a moment's pain.

Their friendship, however, remained as firm as ever, and it was Miss Mitford who was entrusted with the private printing of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.

After her old friend's death in January, 1855, Mrs. Browning wrote, "I had a letter from her just before she went, written in so firm a hand, and so vital a spirit, that I could feel little appre-

hension of never seeing her in the body again. God's will be done. It is better so, I am sure. She seemed to me to see her way clearly, and to have as few troubling doubts in respect to the future life as she had to the imminent end of the present."

FRIENDS

(continued)

§ I

IN her early womanhood Miss Mitford, through her father and his friend James Perry, the Editor of the *Morning Chronicle*, became acquainted with several of the eminent men of the day, for to Tavistock House (the home of the Perrys) came the great politicians and barristers, Romilly, Brougham and Erskine, and numerous authors, poets and professors, including Thomas Moore and the learned Dr. Parr.

In these first days of her authorship she carried on a courtly correspondence on literary matters with two writers who had attained much popularity. One was Richard Alfred Davenport, author of numerous books and articles of criticism, biography and history. In his last years he lived in seclusion at Camberwell, in a house crammed with books and pictures and antiques, and here, amidst inconceivable dirt and decay he was found dead, apparently having taken an overdose of laudanum.

Samuel Jackson Pratt had been in turn cleric, actor, fortune teller and bookseller. He was also an author and playwright, one of his most popular pieces being *The Fair Circassian*. Another well-

known work was *The Tears of Genius on the Death of Dr. Goldsmith*.

During the first years at Bertram House the Mitfords were very friendly with William Cobbett and his family, who lived at Botley. Dr. Mitford had met the famous political writer at a coursing match, and the two men sharing many tastes there commenced a constant exchange of flowers and fruit, seeds and puppies. Cobbett's love of country life greatly appealed to Miss Mitford, who dedicated one of her poems to him. Later the friendship ended through the Doctor becoming involved in a dispute between Cobbett and another man.

§ II

Sir William Elford has been mentioned in a former chapter. When he first wrote to her she was twenty-three and he sixty-one. In token of his admiration for her verses he sent her one of his own paintings, for he was an accomplished artist, contributing to the Royal Academy Exhibition from 1774 to 1834.

After the death of his first wife in 1817 friends hinted that perhaps his young correspondent would become the second Lady Elford, but she always treated such romantic notions with contempt. "He is perfect in everything but not

FRIENDS (CONTINUED)

being in love with me", she wrote, "I shall not marry Sir William Elford; for which fact there is a remarkably good reason, the aforesaid Sir William having no sort of desire to marry me; neither shall I ever marry anybody. He has an outrageous fancy for my letters, and marrying a favourite correspondent would be like killing the goose with the golden eggs".

He belonged to one of the oldest families in the West of England, and took a leading part in the public life of Plymouth, where he was a partner in the banking firm of Elford, Tingcomb and Clerk. He was Recorder for thirty-five years and had been Mayor in 1798 and M.P. from 1796 until 1806. A great friend of William Pitt, the latter had created him a baronet in 1800. He was a Fellow of the Royal and Linnean Societies, publishing his investigations as to a substitute for common yeast, and was also considered a wonderful whist player.

It was through Sir William that she met Benjamin Robert Haydon, the historical painter, one of the most tragic figures in the history of art, for industrious to the point of mania he yet failed to earn a living or to fulfil the promise of his early work.

Sir William had purchased his "Judgement of Solomon" and had urged Mary to go and see it

when she was in Town. She did so, but did not meet the artist until a year or two later, in 1817, when she then sent him a sonnet expressive of her admiration for one of his sketches; Haydon afterwards told her that Keats had "greatly praised" it.

Grateful to her for her sympathy and encouragement, he used to send her long letters full of interesting gossip-anecdotes of the famous people he encountered, descriptions of his own daily adventures and disappointments—related with a vividness and relish which showed that he could write as finely as he could paint.

It was Haydon who always reported to her the success of her plays on the first night of their production.

He once painted her portrait but it proved a complete failure, being generally referred to as the "Cook-maid" portrait. For years he kept it in his studio, and then shortly before he committed suicide he left it in the care of Elizabeth Barrett; later, however, came a message to the effect that the portrait was only lent, as he could not bear to part with it.

§ III

Next to her father, the man whose opinion she most valued and whose affection she most cherished was the Reverend William Harness, the son

FRIENDS (CONTINUED)

of John Harness, M.D., Commissioner for Transports, who had been one of Mrs. Mitford's trustees, and had been present at her wedding.

When Dr. Harness died, the dividend on the small sum in the funds still remaining of Mrs. Mitford's fortune was received by William Harness as executor to his father. He was only three years younger than herself; they had been intimate since childhood, and it has been suggested that had he proposed to her, she would have gladly accepted him. He had, however, an invincible repugnance to Dr. Mitford, generally referring to him as "that humbug".

It was to Harness that she had to apply for remittances from the money in the funds, and occasionally there were evidences that her father had also planned to secure certain sums from it. In all his dealings with her Harness displayed the greatest kindness and consideration, but he did not hesitate to speak his mind on one subject, as when he wrote, "I do not doubt Dr. Mitford's integrity, but I have not the slightest confidence in his prudence; and I am fully satisfied that, if those three thousand and odd pounds were placed at his disposal to-day, they would fly the way so many thousands have gone before them, to-morrow. Excuse me saying this; but I cannot help it."

During the early and middle years of the nine-

teenth century Harness was one of the best known members of London Society. He was a popular preacher (among other appointments he was Incumbent of Regent Square Chapel, St. Pancras, from 1826 to 1844), and Mrs. Siddons had sittings in the two Chapels where he was alternate morning preacher, so that she might always hear him. He was also a regular contributor to the periodicals, and brought out a valuable edition of *Shakespeare*.

A task of his later years was the building of All Saints, Knightsbridge, for which he collected £10,000, contributing £1,000 himself.

He was one of the very few people whom Byron had regarded with unchanging affection. When he entered Harrow, Harness was permanently lame and showed traces of recent illness; this aroused Byron's sympathy, who afterwards said that the first lines he ever wrote were those addressed to Harness. But for his profession, *Childe Harold* would have been dedicated to him.

Thackeray's daughter, Lady Ritchie, and Fanny Kemble, have both left charming memories of him. Lady Ritchie said how familiar were her recollections of Mr. and Miss Harness, his sister and housekeeper, coming along the busy Kensington roadway, and that they were like characters out of some book, with their kind faces and

simple spiritual ways—in touch with so much that was interesting and romantic, and in heart with so much that suffered.

Fanny Kemble writes, “He was of a delightfully sunny, cheerful temper, and very fond of Society, mixing in the very best that London afforded, and frequently receiving with cordial hospitality some of its most distinguished members in his small, modest residence”.

He was very fond of the theatre, and had written two plays, so that he could enter wholeheartedly into Miss Mitford’s dramatic interests. . . . One subject he always treated with the utmost delicacy, as in reply to the gift of a book of sermons Miss Mitford wrote to him, “That second sermon would have done honour to Shakespeare, and I half expected to find you quoting him. There would be a tacit hypocrisy, a moral cowardice, if I were to stop here, and not to confess, what I think you must suspect, although by no chance do I ever talk about it—that I do not, or rather cannot, believe all that the Church requires. I humbly hope that it is not necessary to do so, and that a devout sense of the mercy of God, and an endeavour, however, imperfectly and feebly, to obey the great precepts of justice and kindness, may be accepted in lieu of that entire faith which, in me, will not be commanded. You will not

suspect me of thoughtlessness in this matter; neither, I trust, does it spring from intellectual pride. Fewer persons have a deeper sense of their weakness; few indeed, can have so much weakness of character to deplore and strive against.

“Do not answer this part of my letter. It has cost me a strong effort to say this to you; but it would have been a concealment amounting to a falsity if I had not, and falsehood must be wrong. Do not notice it; a correspondence of controversy could only end in alienation, and I could not afford to lose my oldest and kindest friend—to break up the close intimacy in which I am so happy, and in which I am so proud. Do not notice what I have said, and yet write soon. There is no cause why you should not. I occasion no scandal either by opinions or by conduct. The clergyman of our parish and his family are my most intimate friends. They render me their kindest services, their truest sympathy, and—which is more, far more—they ask for my poor service and my honest sympathy, when they are in difficulty or affliction.”

Harness attended her funeral and survived her fourteen years, and with the assistance of A. G. L'Estrange, he edited *The Life of Mary Russell Mitford. Related in a Selection from her Lectures to her Friends.*

§ IV

Thomas Noon Talfourd, the son of a Reading brewer, she had known since his boyhood, and had watched with affectionate interest his brilliant career in law and literature. He became a leading member of the bar, a member of parliament, sergeant at law and finally a Judge of the Common Pleas. He was also a successful author and playwright; of his various works the best remembered is his *Memorials of Charles Lamb* to whom he acted as executor.

A well-known man-about-town, he was popular in the Dickens coterie (*The Pickwick Papers* was dedicated to him) and was a frequenter of Macready's green room, which enabled him to interest the great actor in Miss Mitford's plays.

In 1836 Macready produced his *Ion*, at Covent Garden, and it was in connection with this play that there occurred his quarrel with Miss Mitford, who was his guest at the time. As usual she was overwhelmed with visitors and invitations, and Talfourd could not conceal his chagrin, with the result that Miss Mitford spent the remainder of her holiday with the Harnesses'. The old cordiality was resumed, later, however, and a short time before his death, in 1854, (which happened

whilst charging the Grand Jury at Stafford) he had paid a pleasant visit to Swallowfield.

§ v

Although apparently on intimate terms with Charles and Mary Lamb, Miss Mitford rarely mentions them in her letters.

There are two interesting references to her in Crabbe-Robinson's diary:

"Sunday, December 5th, 1824.

"Walked back to Islington, and met there with Mr. and Mrs. Talfourd and Miss Mitford, the dramatist and poet, a squat person but with a benevolent and intelligent smile. Scarcely any conversation. Lamb merry.

"December 10th.

"At 10 o'clock went to Talfourd's, where were Talfourd and his wife and Lamb and his sister. A very pleasant chat with them: Miss Mitford there, pleasing looks but no words."

There is also notice of another visit to Islington, in 1826, when she had come to consult them on some dramatic reading for a new play.

Lamb had declared of *Our Village* that

FRIENDS (CONTINUED)

nothing so fresh and characteristic had appeared for a long while.

It is possible that it was through the Lambs that she met De Quincey, whose letters to her from Lasswade indicate much intimacy; on hearing of her death he wrote to his daughter Margaret (with whom she had also exchanged letters) that he was "deeply grieved".

Many other writers were her friends—Alexander Dyce, the famous scholar and Editor of Shakespeare; the Reverend Henry Francis Carey, Keeper of the Printed Books in the British Museum, translator of Dante and Pindar, and the intimate friend of Lamb; Henry Hart Milman, playwright, poet and historian, a former vicar of St. Mary's Reading, who afterwards became Dean of St. Paul's; and Douglas Jerrold and Barry Cornwall. Even the irascible Walter Savage Landor assumed an unwonted deference and geniality in her presence, and was inspired to write a flattering poem in her praise.

§ VI

One who occasionally makes an entertaining appearance in her letters is the learned Dr. Valpy, the Headmaster of the Reading Grammar School.

He belonged to one of the oldest families in

Jersey and was educated in Normandy and at the Grammar Schools of Southampton and Guildford. He entered Pembroke College, Oxford, and after graduating B.A. in 1776, took orders and became second headmaster at Bury St. Edmunds School; then in 1781 he was appointed Headmaster at Reading Grammar School, where he remained some fifty years, introducing many necessary improvements and innovations.

He was an eccentric person, and the Greek plays performed by his scholars afforded Miss Mitford much diversion, for he insisted on her writing the accounts of the performances, which then filled countless columns of the *Reading Mercury*, and which were sent “. . . east, west, south and north wherever mammas and grand-mammas were found”.

In a letter she refers to one of these plays: “One circumstance only a little injured the perfect grouping of the scene. The visitation occurred in October, not long after the conclusion of the summer holidays, and between cricket and boating and the impossibility of wearing gloves . . . our Helens and Antigones exhibited an assortment of sunburnt fists that might have become a tribe of Red Indians.”

Another time the good Doctor planned to present the second part of *Henry the Fourth*, leaving

out Falstaff and Justice Shallow. Later, however, he permitted the inclusion of these characters, "by which piece of good sense", said Miss Mitford, "he spoilt an excellent story".

Dr. Valpy's second son, Abraham James, became a classical editor and printer, and published some of Miss Mitford's early works.

§ VII

From the thirties until 1872 Henry Fothergill Chorley was an outstanding personality in many circles of Society. Literary and musical critic of the *Athenæum*, author and playwright, he was the intimate friend of many famous people, including Mrs. Browning, Dickens, Mendelssohn and Lizt.

One of his numerous works, *Thirty Years Musical Recollections*, edited with an Introduction by Ernest Newman, was republished in 1926.

He was introduced to Miss Mitford during the early part of his career; she rightly described him as clever, crotchety and kind, and they were soon cordial friends and correspondents. Later, however, she was very hurt at his unfavourable criticism of her last book *Atherton*, his almost fanatical frankness not having allowed him to show a more kindly tact towards his old friend.

Miss Mitford induced George Darley, the poet and mathematician, to send to Chorley his *Nepenthe*. C. Colleer Abbott, Darley's biographer, writes, "her encouragement, and Chorley's, came to him at a vital moment. These two friends were the sweet but insufficient good that came to him from *Nepenthe*. At a time of great despondency they renewed his faith in himself as a poet, and restored the determination to pursue an implacable mistress."

It is remarkable that Miss Mitford, who liked above all things clarity of style, should have enjoyed *Nepenthe* and *The May Queen*. Darley was immensely grateful for her encouragement and wrote her long letters which she declared "resembled the choicest parts of the choicest orations, and which were startling to receive and terrible to answer."

Two other poets were her frequent visitors—Francis Bennoch, a wealthy silk merchant, and perhaps the most intimate of Nathaniel Hawthorne's few friends in England; and William Cox Bennett, whose juvenile poetry at one time attained considerable popularity.

She was intimately acquainted with Thomas Hope, the wealthy author and virtuoso, whose two houses, one near Dorking, the other in London, were filled with art-treasures. It is ap-

FRIENDS (CONTINUED)

parent that she owed him many kindnesses, and none showed greater indignation than she when a malicious artist labelled a portrait of him and his lovely wife "Beauty and the Beast".

§ VIII

When Miss Mitford declined to edit Haydon's *Life* the work was undertaken by Tom Taylor, with whom she exchanged some pleasant letters.

Taylor was one of the most versatile and interesting men of the period. He had been called to the bar, had been Professor of English Literature and English Language at London University, and finally became secretary to the Board of Health. An industrious author and journalist, he was for a time editor of *Punch*, and moreover in the space of some thirty years he wrote seventy plays, nearly all of which were successful. These included *Our American Cousin*, in which appeared the immortal Dundreary; *Still Waters Run Deep*, and *The Ticket of Leave Man*.

He told her that, "*Our Village* is one of the books I have read with most pleasure, and I take most pleasure in remembering. I am sure had we been contemporaries, we should have been friends."

§ IX

One of the most fashionable portrait painters of the period was John Lucas, whom Miss Mitford met through Mr. Milton, Mrs. Trollope's brother. She at once expressed great interest in his work, and he painted two portraits of her—one in 1828, the other in 1852. The first was a failure, for a friend had dressed the plump little woman in a claret coloured gown, a blue opera cloak, and a large black hat with a drooping feather, and such finery was so unsuited to her that one prefers poor Haydon's portrait with its quaint mob cap and comfortable shawl. Lucas was of course dissatisfied with this picture, and insisted on painting Dr. Mitford, whom his daughter pronounced to be "the best sitter ever seen", and related how the artist had used up all his carmine the first day, as the old man's complexion was "like the sunny side of a peach".

The picture painted in 1852 was a splendid likeness, ". . . The expression, sweet, and calm and happy;—looking not as I suppose I ever do—but as one might fancy it just possible I might do when thinking of someone whom I love."

It was Lucas who took her to see the Great Exhibition, and at his house she met H. K.

FRIENDS (CONTINUED)

Hablot Browne, (Phiz) who afterwards spoke of her "wonderful wall of a forehead".

An interesting visitor to the cottage in 1836 was George Baxter, the famous colour printer, who made sketches for a new edition of *Our Village*.

§ I

For some time after her father's death Miss Mitford displayed surprising energy. By means of her own industry the cottage was altered and improved in many ways; sofas and chairs were re-covered with bright chintzes, fresh muslin curtains and blinds appeared at the windows, a new dimity bed was set up, and mistress and maid carpeted every room in the house, the work being entirely by their own fingers. At this time, too, she described herself as trotting about at night with a maid and a lantern, going to concerts and lectures in Reading.

In the autumn of 1845, however, she had a very bad attack of rheumatism. It was thought that the Spring would bring some relief, but these hopes were not realized, and she was forced to buy a pony and chaise, being unable to walk any distance.

The two following years did not show any improvement. In the summer of 1848 she spent a holiday at Taplow, hoping, as she said, to lay in a stock of health for the winter, but in the following Spring she wrote to Mrs. Browning that for more than three months she did not think she

was three times out of bed at eight o'clock, and that if she went for a little walk or even a friend visited her, she was so exhausted that she was compelled to go to bed. To make matters worse, she had had another mishap in her chaise, the pony kicking it to pieces before she could be extricated from it.

Luckily she was well cared for by her servants, for Kerenhappuch (sometimes referred to as the hemmer of flounces) combined the capabilities of cook, nurse and companion. Her other servant, Samuel Sweetman, had come at first to drive the pony-chaise for a week or two, but falling in love with Kerenhappuch had married her, and henceforth was an indispensable member of the household. He had been groom in a nobleman's family, and at one time had had the care of the horse which caused the death of Sir Robert Peel.

Various new friendships helped her to endure those painful years. The famous Edinburgh publisher, William Chambers, spent a pleasant day at her cottage, and another interesting visitor was Charles Boner, who called on her at the suggestion of Wordsworth.

Boner was then on holiday in England, his home being at Ratisbon, where he was tutor to the sons of Prince Thurn and Taxis. He had

held a similar position in the family of John Constable, to whom he had also acted as a kind of confidential secretary. Boner translated many of Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales, one volume being dedicated to Miss Mitford, and he also sent for her criticism the MSS. of his *Chamois Hunting in Bavaria*. . . .

Then in January, 1847, she became acquainted with John Ruskin, whom she described as the most charming person she had ever known: "just what if one had a son one should have dreamt of his turning out, in mind, manner, conversation, everything".

Ruskin provided her with many little luxuries which her health and circumstances required, and when he was abroad he constantly sent her rare books and his own beautiful sketches. His father, too, made her gifts of all kinds of delicacies—as she once said, he sent her champagne by dozens; and so evident was his desire to help her that she did not hesitate to apply for sick-room necessities.

"Your figs arrived last night after post time," she wrote to the son, "you exhaust the vocabulary of gratitude, though not the feeling. Do not send any more of those precious boxes. That was a sick-woman's fancy and has been sparingly taken. And now I wonder if I be doing right or

wrong in going on—wrong in all the conventionalities—right probably according to my knowledge of your excellent father—the motive being of course that what I am about to beg is part of life—the prescription which interposes between death and me—and that the motive of begging it of dear Mr. Ruskin is the not knowing where to get it in anything resembling the same purity—I mean the sherry, a glass of which taken with my soup (the rest of which is the pure juice of game) every evening.”

§ II

The beginning of the year 1850 found her somewhat improved in health, although she had helped to nurse little Henry and Sam, who had been seriously ill with small-pox.

Another anxiety was the cottage, which, though so recently repaired, was now in a ruinous condition. She received many suggestions for a new place of residence, and at one time thought of taking a house in Wales, but finally she chose a cottage at Swallowfield, a little further along the Basingstoke Road. Later she wrote: “My most kind friend Mr. Ruskin will understand why I connect his name with the latest event that has befallen me, the leaving of the

cottage that for thirty years had been my shelter."

For the present, however, she had to stay in her damp and crumbling dwelling at Three Mile Cross.

Except for making a volume of selections from Dumas for juvenile readers she had done no writing for a long time. Now, however, she settled down to work in order to oblige Henry Chorley, who was editing an unsuccessful publication called *The Ladies' Companion*, and for this she wrote a series of papers called "Readings of Poetry", which became immensely popular, and which were afterwards collected and expanded into *Recollections of a Literary Life*.

In August, 1851, before undertaking the arduous task of a removal, she spent a short holiday in London, calling on the Brownings who were staying with Mr. Kenyon, and paying a visit to the Great Exhibition.

Then one September evening she walked from Three Mile Cross to her new home at Swallowfield. In her own charming, simple words she has recorded her thoughts at that time.

"It was grief to go. There I had toiled and striven, and tasted so deeply of bitter anxiety, of fear, and of hope, as often falls to the lot of woman. There, in the fulness of age, I had lost

those whose love had made my home sweet and precious. Alas! There is no hearth so humble but it has known such tales of joy and sorrow! Friends, many and kind, had come to that bright garden room. The list would fill more pages than I have to give. . . .”

She was very pleased with her new home, which she describes as having a trim cottage garden divided by a hawthorn hedge from a little field guarded by grand old elms. It had a cheerful glimpse of the highroad, and stood upon a scrap of common which caught every breeze, and she saw the coolest of waters from her window.

The house has been enlarged since Miss Mitford's time, but it still retains its charming old-world appearance.

Near neighbours were the Russells of Swallowfield Park, who proved to be the kindest and most attentive of friends.

The Manor had been part of the dowry of Tudor Queens, and amongst its famous owners had been Lord Clarendon, William Backhaus the Astrologer, and Rosicrucian, and Thomas Pitt, East Indian Merchant and Governor of Madras, and the possessor of the famous Pitt diamond. Sir Henry Russell, whose father had bought it in 1820, had lived for many years in India, where he had been appointed Resident of Hyderabad.

His second wife, Marie Clotilde, was the daughter of Baron Benôit Mottet de la Fontaine, the last French Governor of Pondicherry.

Sir Henry died soon after Miss Mitford came to Swallowfield. His son Henry, the third Baronet, fought in the Crimea, where he gained the Victoria Cross.

Scarcely a day passed without Lady Russell or one of her daughters coming to visit Miss Mitford, and an ineffable boon was their fine library, which supplied her with many quaint and rare books.

Miss Mitford gave an instance of their kindness when she was deeply interested in Mirabeau. She had only the first four volumes of his Life, and being impatient to read more, applied to Miss Russell for further material; a few hours later a horse and cart appeared at her door, bearing a trunkful of volumes concerning him. . . .

The early part of 1852 brought her various new interests and pleasures. Her new book *Recollections of a Literary Life* found for her many new admirers, and she wrote in April, "Ever since it has been published I have had, day by day, letters upon letters, packets upon packets, books upon books, from all parts of the country—remote villages in Wales and Scotland and Ireland—not merely from enthusiastic girls and young poets at Oxford and Cambridge, but from people the most

unexpected—grave old merchants, half ashamed—self-educated men, who toil all day and read and write half the night—and professional men in our great towns, who find relief from their mind weariness in the soothing delights of poetry. I should be afraid to tell you how many strangers have written to me during the last three months”.

Then she had made acquaintance with Charles Kingsley and his wife, who lived at Eversley. At first she had not heard very favourable rumours of him as that “between his stammering and his discursiveness there was no getting on with him”, but when she finally met him she found him a most charming companion, and greatly treasured the poem he wrote in her honour.

In many ways Swallowfield was a beneficial change from Three Mile Cross, for in one of her letters Miss Mitford said that now she was among people of a high class, and that they treated her as if she were a greater lady than themselves, respecting her ways and habits, and contriving in every way to make all pleasant to her.

In the summer of 1852 she was very ill again with low fever and rheumatism, having to be lifted in and out of the chaise and helped from step to step upstairs. It was a long and depressing illness, and she was unfeignedly thankful when William Harness came to stay nearby for

three weeks, devoting all his time to reading and talking to her. In December occurred the last and most fatal carriage accident, for when driving in Swallowfield Park her chaise was overturned and she was thrown out upon the road. Unfortunately Kerenhappuch could not nurse her, as she gave birth to a little girl shortly after this mishap to her mistress.

§ III

From that time until her death two years later, Miss Mitford was an entirely helpless invalid. The bruised nerves of hip and thigh, the injured spine, combined with acute rheumatism, prevented her from lifting hand or foot, and thus for months she was forced to lie in bed, unable to turn from side to side, or was confined to her chair night and day. Yet through it all she never lost her cheerfulness or her interest in others, writing long letters, reading countless books, both old and new, and being thankful as she said, for the use of her intellect and her right hand.

She welcomed new acquaintances with all her old warmth and animation, ever pleased to advise and admire.

One who always cheered her was the young and handsome James Payn, the future author of

Lost Sir Massingbird, and who became editor of *Chambers Journal* and the *Cornhill Magazine*.

He has left some delightful recollections of her, and it must not be forgotten that he saw her at the most painful period of her illness. He called her a dear little old lady,—“a venerable Fairy”, with bright sparkling eyes, a clear incisive voice, and a laugh that carried you away with it.

He spoke, too, of the microscopic writing of her letters, which looked as if they were done with a stylus, and without blot or flaw, the out-sides of the envelopes and even their flaps being covered with writing, for she had lived in a time when postage was very dear, “like Southey she used to boast that she could send more for her money by post than anyone else, and when the necessity no longer existed, the custom remained”.

Again he says, “She lived and breathed and moved in an atmosphere of books, and when not writing books, she was writing about them. There was hardly any work of merit which she did not discuss, and always with a vehemence of feeling and expression as though it were a thing of life”.

Another new friend was Digby Starkey, whom Miss Mitford described as “a favourite correspondent of Maria Edgeworth, and having lived in

literary widowhood since her death, has adopted me as a sort of second wife—a very unworthy one”. He was Accountant General in Dublin, and had written Novels and Dramatic Poems.

This summer of 1853 was very wet, and it was only on rare occasions that she could be carried in to the garden to her favourite seat under the acacia tree. The dampness retarded any possible progress and she was so weakened that to go otherwise than at a foot’s pace in her pony chaise caused pain all over her body for days afterwards. With unbelievable courage and determination, however, she undertook to assist in the publishing of a collected edition of her Plays and Dramatic Scenes, revising them and writing prefaces, and she also commenced the long short story of *Atherton*, which appeared with several tales re-published from the *Annuals*.

Never was a book written under more trying circumstances—she suffered continually from pain and exhaustion, and was so crippled that her pen had to be dipped into the ink for her; nevertheless she exercised all her customary care, every page being written three times over. Miss Mitford gives further details in a letter, “The printers failed just after they began—nearly a month was lost in finding another, and at last it was driven through the press at the rate of 100

pages a day—nearly killing me and causing errata out of number—for the proofs came to me without ever having been read over at the office”.

The book appeared early in 1854, and its splendid success rewarded her for her labour, for two editions were sold out immediately; it appeared in Paris and Leipzig, and in America they stereotyped the work. Miss Mitford herself said that its reception during the war time was wonderful, and that Mr. Mudie's four hundred copies were quite inadequate to supply his eager customers.

§ IV

This year was, in many ways, a happy one—Kerenhappuch's pretty little girl was now her constant companion; neighbours paid her the greatest attention, and each day brought letters from new friends and admirers. Whenever possible she answered these herself—giving vivid details of her surroundings.

One spring day she writes, “I am sitting now at my open window, not high enough to see out of it, but inhaling the soft summer breezes, with an exquisite jar of roses on the window sill, and a huge sheaf of fresh-gathered meadow sweet giving its almondy fragrance from outside; looking on

blue sky and green waving trees, with a bit of road and some cottages in the distance, and K——'s little girl's merry voice calling Fanchon in the court."

For months it was thought she might die at any moment—the smallest exertion or excitement bringing on terrible attacks of breathlessness. All, however, was endured with unflinching courage and patience. "For my own part," she wrote to a friend, "I hold this visitation to have been sent in mercy by that most merciful God to draw me to Him. May He grant His Grace that the opportunity be not cast away! I have none of the 'holy joys' that I often hear of, nor even your 'home feeling', dear friend; nothing but a trembling, fearful, humble hope, and a full sense of my unworthiness. Nay, I have much to strive against in wandering thoughts, which often beset me in prayer. But I strive against them, and, through Christ's infinite love and mercy, I have hope".

She was only kept alive by means of the strongest stimulants—game and turtle soup prepared for the sick at the London Tavern, with a glass of sherry in each portion, and cognac and water every few hours.

In a letter dated September she says, "For three months I have been given over—for nearly

the same time I have been unable to bear the exertion of being lifted into bed. It brought on exhaustion, and that caused a frightful and dangerous struggle for breath. So I sit here, day and night, on a water cushion and an easy chair, sometimes propped by air-pillows, sometimes with my feet on another chair. . . . All along I have retained such mental faculties as have been vouchsafed to me—my sympathies and my affectations, my love of nature and of literature—even my interest in little things, and my old cheerfulness. These are great alleviations, so have been the warm kindness of friends and neighbours;—the sympathy of almost all the eminent persons in literature, especially the authoresses, the success of my two books, and the cordial interest shown by strangers.—God has been very merciful”.

Mr. May was the kindest and the most attentive of doctors. He was the Senior Surgeon at the Berkshire Hospital, and his practice was so immense that he tired four pairs of horses in a day. Miss Mitford was greatly touched by his care of her, declaring that he continued to watch the symptoms and to exhaust every resource of diet and of medicine just as if his fame and fortune depended upon the result. Another who did much to cheer and comfort her during these last painful years was the Reverend Hugh

Pearson, the Vicar of Sonning, who was the dearest friend of Arthur Stanley. . . .

In December she was enjoying *Humphrey Clinker* and planning to read *Peregrine Pickle*, *Roderick Random*, and then *Gil Blas* and *Don Quixote*. She also continued to write letters, long letters. One note, however, dated January 7th, 1855, was left unsealed, and Sam was told that if any further change took place, he was to add to it another message.

On January 11th he wrote thus to Mr. Bennoch:

“DEAR SIR,

“Our dear mistress is no more. She died last night, at five o’clock, without a struggle. Lady Russell and her eldest daughter were with us; Mr. May had just left. She wished me, the day before, to give her love to all her friends, and thank them for all their kindnesses.

“I remain your obedient servant,

“SAMUEL SWEETMAN.”

“Could you kindly send the enclosed notes; and please, sir, write to Mr. Fields, and tell him Miss Mitford desired me to give her love to all American friends.”

As she lay in her coffin, her face bore wonderful resemblance to a miniature painted in her childhood, and its expression was one of the greatest peace and charity.

A fitting conclusion to this chapter is an extract from the *Athenæum*.

“Miss Mitford’s works did not represent all her gifts, produced as they were under sharp pressure, and at moments when it was fitter that the body of a delicate woman should have been at rest, rather than that her fancy should have been goaded into exertion. Her letters were charming: her conversation was shrewd, racy and elegant—full of pertinence in its allusions, full of anecdote in its recollections. She was a faithful and charming friend to those she loved. She bore up against the trials of a hard and ill-understood life with a sweetness and vivacity such as could have made strangers imagine that there was nothing to bear. She was well read in old English and in French literature. Not long after her father’s death, her own health, which had been shaken by her dutiful attendance on him, began to fail; and the illness which carried her away was slow, painful and dispiriting. But her sweetness of temper and her brightness of mind never failed her to the

last, since, only a few hours before the news of her decease reached her friends, she had received from her greeting and tokens in her own handwriting,—showing not merely that the old kind heart was not soured by suffering, but that her sympathies had not been contracted by narrow fortunes, age and pain.

“There are few of whom surviving friends will long think so affectionately and so cheerfully as of Mary Russell Mitford. Her name has an honoured place in the library of healthy and real English literature.”

AMERICAN ADMIRERS

§ I

As we have seen, one of Miss Mitford's last cares was to send a message to her American friends, whose esteem she had always greatly cherished.

J. G. Whittier, the famous author, philanthropist, and poet of the Anti-Slavery Movement expressed feelings shared by countless other Americans when he commenced a New Year letter thus:—

“MY DEAR FRIEND, MARY RUSSELL MITFORD,

“Permit me to wish thee a happy New Year! I am quite sure that thousands who have been made happier by thy writings will join with me. I wish thou would'st come over to America, just to see what a host of friends thou hast made on this side of the water.”

Such popularity dated from the earliest days of her authorship, for in the spring of 1814 she received the following letter:—

“New York, Oct. 23, 1813.

“MADAM,

“We have the honour of transmitting to you a copy of our second edition of your admirable *Narrative Poems on the Female Character*.

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All who have hearts to feel, and understandings to discriminate, must earnestly wish you health and pleasure to complete your plan. We shall be gratified by a line acknowledging the receipt of the copy through the medium of our friends, Messrs. Longmans & Co. We send it under the care of the Rev. John B—— D.D., who has engaged to deliver it to Mr. Valpy.

“We have the honour to be, Madam,

“Your most obedient servants,

“EASTBURN, KIRK & Co.”

These publishers were established at number 86, Broadway.

§ II

One of Miss Mitford's earliest correspondents was Miss Catherine Sedgwick, daughter of a Senator in Congress, who later became Judge of the Supreme Court of his State. Miss Sedgwick lived at Stockbridge, and had, like other residents of Western Massachusetts, some associations with the New York literary set. She was both school-mistress and authoress, her novels *Hope Leslie*, *The Linwoods*, etc., attaining a wide popularity. She was an intimate friend of Fanny Kemble's, who made her acquaintance when touring with her father on her first American trip.

Miss Sedgwick wrote extremely long and grandiloquent letters, which are interesting inso-much as they show how genuine was Miss Mitford's popularity in the States. The following is an extract from a letter written in 1833:—

“A neighbour of ours, who is not rich enough to keep a coach, but has sense enough to keep a sociable and enjoy it daily, took me a few days since a little drive into the country, and, avoiding the thronged, broad avenues, selected an obscure road that, but for occasional glimpses of the Hudson, whitened with the tokens of commerce, sails and steamboats, would have cheated us into the feeling that we were a thousand miles from the city. We came to a sudden turn that lead us into a deeply shaded, nooked lane. ‘Ah, turn here, Sydney,’ said my companion, ‘into Miss Mitford’s lane, as you call it.’ This, as you may suppose, made my heart beat quicker. Is it not something to have given a name and a heightened charm to nature three thousand miles away? The mother and son continued to tell me of their exquisite pleasure from your works, of *the boy’s* familiar acquaintance with May and Dash, etc.”

Miss Sedgwick's brother and nephew stayed for a few days with the Mitfords, and then in 1839, the authoress herself arrived in England, and went straight from Portsmouth to Three Mile Cross.

The coachman who drove her there was an old acquaintance of Miss Mitford's, whom he described as "one of the dearest women in England", and when she made her appearance he said, "Now you would not take that little body there for the great author, would you?" The two ladies were mutually delighted with each other, but later Miss Mitford disapproved of the American's account of her visit, especially when the latter quoted the coachman's remark that Dr. Mitford was "an 'carty old boy".

§ III

Another acquaintance was Nathaniel Parker Willis, the famous New York editor and gossip writer, whose familiar accounts of English Society made him heartily disliked. One of the best known examples of his florid style is his description of Lady Blessington.

Miss Mitford, meeting him in London in 1834 was most favourably impressed with his manners and appearance, and he was only prevented from

paying a long visit to Three Mile Cross by falling in love with "a blue-eyed girl", who became his wife. In one of his very complimentary letters he says, evidently referring to *Belford Regis*, "perhaps there is no book in the world so pleasant to be on the grass with and read to a charming woman. I have only grudged the transfer of leaves from my right hand to my left, and if you had heard the '*Is that all?*' of my listener as I closed the volume, you would have felt that you have not lived in vain—as who has given pleasure to the world, or beguiled weariness, or refined the aspect of life?"

Again Willis writes, "You are distinguished in the world as the 'gentlewoman' among authoresses, as you are for your rank merely 'in literature'. I have often thought you very enviable for the universality of that opinion about you. You share it with Sir Philip Sidney, who was in his day the *gentleman* among authors."

George Ticknor, Professor of French and Spanish Language and of the Belles Lettres in Harvard College, and historian of Spanish Literature, paid a visit to the cottage, as did Daniel Webster, the great orator. Miss Mitford afterwards wrote of the latter in her *Recollections of a Literary Life*, and, her words being reprinted in nearly every newspaper in the States, his family told her that

of all that had been written on him her article gave them the most pleasure.

Another visitor was the actress Charlotte Cushman, who had played in *Rienzi* in the States. She became as popular here as she was in her own country, and had a brilliant season at the Princess's Theatre where she appeared in *Fazio*, *Macbeth*, *A School for Scandal*, etc.

§ IV

The most intimate amongst the American friends was James T. Fields, of the famous Boston Publishing House of Ticknor, Reed and Fields, who was a popular personality in literary circles on both sides of the Atlantic. During their American readings Dickens and Thackeray found his advice invaluable; he collected and published De Quincey's works, and it was at his suggestion that Hawthorne transformed *The Scarlet Letter* from a short story into a novel.

It was through John Kenyon that he called on Miss Mitford at Three Mile Cross, in the summer of 1847, and immediately there was established between them the most cordial sympathy and understanding.

In his delightful book, *Yesterdays with Authors*, in which he writes of Thackeray, Hawthorne,

Dickens, and Wordsworth, he devotes a lengthy chapter to Miss Mitford.

"She would discourse so eloquently of the sights and sounds about us, that her talk seemed to me to be 'far above singing. . . .' She knew all the literature of rural life, and her memory was stored with delightful eulogies of forests and meadows. When she repeated or read aloud the poetry she loved, her accents were

'like flowers voices, if they could but speak'."

In one of his letters from Boston he tells her how he longs to be in England. "I open a book in my library-room of an evening, and try to read, but as I go on, straightway the printed page slips from my mental vision and I am in 'distant climes and lands remote'. Now I am looking from the roadside on a cricket ground. There is a small pony chaise quietly resting on the opposite side of the way. A very dear friend of mine is talking cozily with other dear friends who cluster about her side. A gentleman on horseback is looking across the fields. Somebody says it is the author of *Alton Locke*. I walk up to the afore-said gentleman, but am disappointed. It is some other fine looking man who has come out to enjoy the day. There is a picturesque mansion in

sight. The air is clear and bracing, and off we go to explore the grounds. Sam talks to us by the way of by-gone times when merry scenes were going on within the fine old house. Now all looks dull and dreary. There are dilapidated houses where the dogs used to live 'on the fat of the land', and now the whole scene is changed, and the tall ancestral trees seem to sigh amid the desolation. Now I am riding through the Duke's grounds and the pony is full of spirit and dashes through the gates like mad. Cattle are grazing all around, and I can smell the hay among the meadows. Now I am sitting in your pleasant room looking out across the road. K. has sent away several carriages, and we all listen while you read to us dear friend Bennoch's charming May poem, *And Welcome in the Glorious May*. I can hear it as distinctly as when we sat together that pleasant afternoon (it seems but yesterday) and heard your beautiful and never-to-be-forgotten reading of those verses. Now we are at your hospitable dinner-table, and I am trying to carve, an art I never shall learn. Then 'the carriage is ready', and we say 'Good-bye', and drive towards the station, talking of the happy hours we have spent with our friend, the lady of *Our Village*. . . ."

He repaid her hospitality by sending her mag-

nificent gifts from his famous old Corner Book Shop in Boston; thus when he learnt of her admiration of Louis Napoleon he despatched numerous books and pictures about her idol.

She gave him her favourite portrait painted by Lucas, and it was hung in his office in Boston, near to that of Wordsworth. He said of it, "Everything that belongs to the beauty of old age, one will find recorded in that charming countenance".

§ v

During her latter years one of her greatest enjoyments was her correspondence with American writers.

After the publication of *Recollections of a Literary Life* she wrote ". . . I have had a perfect avalanche of kindness from America . . . letters some addressed to Mr. Fields, but all meant for me, from Longfellow and Whittier, and Whipple, and Giles, and Holmes, and Hawthorne, full of a warmth and reality such as does one's heart good."

Mrs. Jared Sparks, the wife of the President of Harvard College, had actually suggested that Miss Mitford should come with her gardener, maid, and dog, and even the pony, and live for a

year or two with her and the Professor. Mrs. Sparks occasionally sent presents to Swallowfield—flowers and a collection of autumn leaves, and a box of biscuits.

The *Recollections* proved to be one of Miss Mitford's most popular books in the States. Again she wrote, "I find that the influence of these volumes has been great: Dr. Holmes has been reprinted in consequence . . . and Whittier and Hawthorne both say that I have done more for their reputation than all the rest of the critics put together, and that not only in England but in America. Longfellow, I understand, says the same."

The same enthusiasm greeted the appearance of her last work *Atherton, and Other Tales*. In a letter dated October, 1854, she says, "Amongst the many sunbeams which illumine my sick chamber none are brighter than the letters which come from America. I think that within the last ten days I have had letters and messages from every author of note in the States. (Always excepting Mrs. Stowe, whose book I never read.)"

It should be noted that Miss Mitford held the then very original idea that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was ". . . one-sided, exaggerated, false—with some cleverness, but of a very disagreeable kind. . . ."

During Hawthorne's Consulship at Liverpool it was planned that he should visit Swallowfield, but evidently this could not be arranged, as a short time before she died Miss Mitford wrote, "One of my reasons for praying, if it be His Will, for a prolongation of life is to know and to thank Mr. Hawthorne."

Another correspondent was Bayard Taylor, the poet and traveller, and author of *Views Afoot, or Europe Seen with a Knapsack and Staff, Lands of the Saracens*, etc.

He wrote, "Shall I ever forget that stormy afternoon I passed in your little library? . . . Stoddard and I speak of you often and involuntarily, as an old and tried friend—so near and familiar the thought of you has become."

The names of Stoddard, Whipple, and Parsons occur occasionally in her letters to Mr. Fields. R. H. Stoddard was a poet who became Literary Editor of the *New York World* and the *Mail and Express*, E. P. Whipple an essayist and Lyceum lecturer; T. W. Parsons was a dentist whose translation of Dante's *Inferno* brought him well merited fame, and whose lines *On a Bust of Dante* have been described as embodying ". . . one of the few flawless lyrics written by an American."

THE most interesting of Miss Mitford's early works is the poem entitled *Christina, or the Maid of the South Seas*.

The events which it describes—the mutiny led by Mr. Christian, ship's carpenter, against the tyrannical Captain Bligh, on board the *Bounty*—have been recalled in that strange book *Child of the Deep*, and in Owen Rutter's recent novel, *Cain's Birthday*.

The story was based on the following account in the *Quarterly Review*, the facts being those transmitted to the Admiralty by Sir Sydney Smith:—"Captain Folger, of the American ship *Topaz*, of Boston, relates that upon landing on Pitcairn's Island (Encarnacion of Quiros) in lat. 25° 2' S. long. 130° 0' W. he found there an Englishman of the name of Alexander Smith, the only person remaining of nine that escaped in his Majesty's late ship *Bounty*, Captain W. Bligh Smith relates, that after putting Captain Bligh in the boat, Christian, the leader of the Mutiny, took the command of the ship, and went to Otaheite, where the great part of the crew left her, except Christian, Smith, and seven others, who each took

wives, and six Otaheitean men servants, and shortly after arrived at the said island, where they ran the ship on shore, and broke her up; this event took place in the year 1790.

Shortly after their arrival Christian committed suicide and four years later the Otaheiteans revolted and killed every man but Smith. The rebels were then murdered by the widows, so that the only man left on the island was Smith, with eight or nine women and several children. Later, Smith tilled the island and educated the children. When the American vessel called there was a population of about thirty-five adults.

Miss Mitford changed Folger's name to Seymour, and Smith's to that of Fitzalan, and related, along with the foregoing events, the love story of Christian's daughter Christina, who was betrothed to Fitzalan's son Hubert: On board the vessel, however, was "British Henry," who fell in love with her; the maiden returned his affection, and finally the unselfish Hubert renounced her in favour of his rival.

Christina is an interesting and diverting example of the type of narrative poem which once found great favour with the public.

The effect of the storm is thus described—

"Then to the sailor's anguish'd thought,

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What pangs despair and memory brought!
 They mus'd upon their quiet home
 'What daemon prompted them to roam?'
 Of peace and comfort far away,
 The tranquil cot, the woodfire gay;
 And children, dearer far than life,
 Betrothed maid, or faithful wife!
 Whilst British Henry breath'd a prayer
 For mother dear, for sister fair;
 Then, with reliev'd and stainless heart,
 Again resum'd his toilsome part."

Here is a picture of the lovers—

"Soon Henry sought Christina's side,
 Henry, in youthful beauty's pride,
 With sunny locks and brow of snow,
 With ruddy lips and manly glow,
 With limbs the graces might have form'd,
 By youth and health and passion warm'd;
 'Twas like young Pleasure blithe and jolly,
 Wooing the fair nun Melancholy;
 Yet modesty and awe repress
 The ardor of his generous breast;
 Little he spoke, but what he said
 Christina with a smile repaid;
 A smile so holy, sad and faint
 It might have grac'd a dying saint." . . .

The proofs of the poem were corrected by Samuel Taylor Coleridge who greatly offended the Mitfords by omitting the invocation to Sir Walter Scott.

§ II

Of the poems *Watlington Hill* and *Weston Grove*, the former is in praise of coursing, the latter describes the charms of a friend's country seat; in their vigour and freshness they are a pleasant contrast to *Christina*. The following is from *Watlington Hill*:—

“ . . . first the charmed eye would greet
 The lowland home-scenes vallies sweet,
 Of wood and turf and field;
 Where the snug cot, the lordly seat
 Like grandeur and contentment meet
 And mutual beauty yield.
 And first would trace the winding road
 Which through the beech-wood leads
 By red-cloaked maids and ploughmen trod,
 Rich wains and prancing steeds. . . .

How boldly yonder cloud so bright
 Throws out that clump of trees;
 Scarce, till it crost the ethereal light,

Like the wren's plume on snow-ridge white.
 The keenest eye that wood could seize.
 'Tis distant Farringdon I deem;
 And far below Thames' silver stream
 Thrids the fair romantic bridge
 Of Wallingford's old town;
 And high above the Whittenham ridge
 Seems the gay scene to crown.
 But what is that, which to the right,
 Upon the horizon's utmost verge,
 A fairy picture glitters bright,
 Like sea-foam on the crested surge?
 Is it the varying fleecy cloud
 That takes in sport the figure proud,
 Where domes and turrets seem to rise
 And spirey steeples mock our eyes?
 No; real is that lovely scene,
 'Tis England's boast, 'tis learning's Queen,
 'Tis Oxford."

§ III

Mrs. Browning wrote, "My own opinion is that she stands higher as the authoress of *Our Village* than of *Rienzi*, and writes prose better than poetry, and transcends rather in Dutch minuteness and high finishing than in Italian ideality and passion."

This opinion has been shared by posterity, for even in Miss Mitford's later years few were stirred by the political and family feuds of her Italian noblemen. In *Some Account of the British Stage* by the Rev. John Genest will be found complete outlines of the plays together with just verdicts of their merits.

Julian is pronounced "tolerable", *Foscari* ". . . has considerable merit on the whole, but it verges towards dulness—the language is in general good, but at times unnatural—many lines might be omitted to advantage."

"Miss Mitford has supported the character of *Rienzi* with great spirit, but her play on the whole is rather dull—her language is in general good—the speeches in which *Rienzi* avows the poverty of himself and his parents have peculiar merit, but the *Dramatis Personæ* sometimes speak in a manner not suited to their situation—when *Claudius* is pleading for her husband's life she talks about the wolf and the wren—*Rienzi* at the close of the same scene makes a simile at a very improper time."

On the whole the plays are very remarkable productions to have come from a woman's pen, especially when one considers the other type of literature in which she excelled. In those days, that Macready termed her talents "semi-masculine"

line" in their cleverness, embodied the highest possible praise.

Rienzi was produced in the most lavish and careful style; Stanfield painted the scenery, and the principal part was taken by the gay and graceful Charles Mayne Young, the Surgeon's son who had been at Eton, and who, before becoming an actor, had been a merchant's clerk. Miss Mitford was greatly charmed with him, and he, on his part, was an admirer of her books, for amidst all the excitement of one of his Christmas pantomimes he wrote that he had no comfort but *Our Village*, which he "ate like an epicure, bit by bit, to prolong the meal."

Miss Mitford owed much to the interest and encouragement given her by Charles Kemble, and she confessed that she was "the least in the world in love with him".

Gossip said that she was inspired with a similar feeling towards a certain Mr. Cathcart, who appeared in her *Charles I.* She merely wished, however, to draw attention to talents which only she thought in any way remarkable.

§ IV

The exquisite simplicity of her prose was only attained by the most arduous care and practice,

Writing to Sir William Elford she said, "You would laugh if you saw me puzzling over my prose. You have no notion how much difficulty I find in writing anything at all readable. One cause of this is, my having been so egregious a letter-writer. I have accustomed myself to a certain careless sauciness, a fluent incorrectness, which passed very well with indulgent friends, such as yourself, my dear Sir William, but will not do at all for that tremendous correspondent, the Public. So I ponder over every phrase, disjoint every sentence, and finally produce such lumps of awkwardness, that I really expect, instead of paying me for them, Mr. Colburn and Mr. Baldwin will send me back the trash. But I will improve. This is another resolution, which is as fixed as fate."

The history of the revising, expanding and publishing of the sketches entitled *Our Village* is told in a series of letters to Sir William. In the first, dated January, 1824, she tells him of how for months her mother was ill with spasmodic asthma; how she was nursed to almost complete health, and then, with going out too soon, suffered a most serious relapse. "You may imagine that this has been no slight interruption to my business. Nevertheless, I am hoping to get out a little volume of very playful prose, ('You will like it, I promise

you', as Mr. Haydon said to me, a week ago, about his picture of 'Silenus and Nymphs') some time this season. It would have been out before now if I had been able to go to London and arrange matters with my friend and book-seller, George Whittaker. This young and dashing friend of mine (Papa's godson, by the by) is this year sheriff of London, and is, I hear, so immersed in his official dignities as to have his head pretty much turned topsy-turvy, or rather, in French phraseology, to have lost that useful appendage; so I should not wondow now, if it did not come out, till I am able to get to town and act for myself in the business, and I have not yet courage to leave Mamma. It will be called—at least, I mean it so to be—*Our Village*; will consist of essays and characters and stories, chiefly of country life in the manner of the *Sketch Book*, but without sentimentality or pathos—two things which I abhor—and will be published with or without my name, as it pleases my worshipful bibliopole. At all events, the author has no wish to be *incognita*; so I tell it you as a secret to be told."

When published Sir William admired it but said he thought the sketches would have been better if written in the form of letters. Miss Mitford replied, "The sketches are too long, and necessarily too much connected, for *real* corre-

spondence; and as to anything make-believe, it has been my business to keep that out of sight as much as possible. Besides which, we are free and easy in these days, and talk to the public as a friend. Read *Elia*, or the *Sketch Book*, or Hazlitt's *Table Talk*, or any popular book of the new school, and you will find that we have turned over the Johnsonian periods and the Blair-ian formality to keep company with the wigs and hoops, the stiff curtsies and low bows of our ancestors. In short, my dear friend, letters are nowadays more the vehicles of kindness, and less of wit than they used to be. . . .

“Having thus made the best defence I can against your criticism, I proceed to answer your question, ‘Are the characters and descriptions true?’ Yes! Yes! Yes! As true as is well possible. You, as a great landscape painter, know that in painting a favourite scene you do a little embellish, and can’t help it; you avail yourself of happy incidents of atmosphere, and if anything be ugly, you strike it out, or if anything be wanting, you put it in. But still the picture is a likeness; and that this is a very faithful one, you will judge when I tell you that a worthy neighbour of ours, a post-captain, who has been in every quarter of the globe, and is equally distinguished for the sharp look-out and the *bonhomie* of his profession,

accused me most seriously of carelessness in putting 'The Rose' for 'The Swan', as the sign of our next-door neighbour; and was no less disconcerted at the *misprint* (as he called it) of 'B' for 'R' in the name of our next town. *A cela près*, he declares the picture to be exact. Nevertheless, I do not expect to be poisoned. Why should I? I have said no harm of my neighbours, have I? The great danger would be that my dear friend Joel might be spoilt; but I take care to keep the book out of our pretty Harriette's way; and so hope that that prime ornament of our village will escape the snare for his vanity which the seeing so exact a portrait of himself in a printed book might occasion.

"By-the-way, the names of the villagers are true—of the higher sketches they are feigned, of course."

By 1835 *Our Village* had passed through fourteen large editions in England and nearly as many in the States, and during the Christmas of 1853 Mr. Fields' Boston publishing house ordered a thousand copies.

In one of her letters Miss Mitford relates how a friend, travelling in Spain and feeling ill and homesick inquired for an English book, and received a copy of a Spanish translation of *Our Village*. . . .

The book embodies the most exquisite prose pictures; it is a complete nature calendar, and never were the changing aspects of light and atmosphere, flowers and trees, depicted with such a sensitive fidelity of detail. The human portraiture, too, is remarkable for its gentle discerning humour. Indeed George Saintsbury in his *History of Nineteenth Century Literature*, declares that her essays are only second to those of *Elia*.

One of the most delightful sketches, and which is an excellent example of her individual style, is that called *The Copse*, and is an account of a springtime walk in the woods. It describes April weather and scenery, the characters of the three dogs which accompany her, and the chasing of a flock of sheep and lambs. The dominant feature, however, is the character sketch of Mrs. Sally Mearing, who is encountered in the course of the walk.

Mrs. Sally lived with her father in a large and prosperous farm. "She was thoroughly of the old school and had a most comfortable contempt for the new; rose at four in winter and summer, breakfasted at six, dined at eleven in the forenoon, supped at five and was regularly in bed before eight, except when the haytime or the harvest imperiously required her to sit up till sunset,—a necessity to which she submitted with no very

good grace. To a deviation from these hours, and to the modern iniquities of white aprons, cotton stockings, and muslin handkerchiefs (Mrs. Sally herself always wore check, black worsted, and a sort of yellow compound which she was wont to call *susy*) together with the invention of drill plough and thrashing-machines, and other agricultural novelties, she failed not to attribute all the mishaps or misdoings of the whole parish."

After her father's death, for various reasons, the independent Mrs. Sally left the farm, and took up her residence in part of a large farm house owned by an old bachelor. "Now Farmer Robinson was quite as notorious for his aversion to petticoated things, as Mrs. Sally for her hatred to the unfeathered bipeds who wear doublet and hose, so that there was a little astonishment in that quarter too, and plenty of jests which the honest farmer speedily silenced, by telling all who joked on the subject that he had given his lodger fair warning, that, let people say what they would, he was quite determined not to marry her; so that if she had any views that way, it would be better for her to go elsewhere."

This made no ill-impression on her, and there she stayed ". . . with her little maid and tabby cat, a decrepit sheep dog and much of the lumber of Court Farm, which she could not find in her

heart to part from. There she follows her old ways and her old hours, untempted by matrimony, and unassailed (as far as I can hear) by love or by scandal, with no other grievance than an occasional dearth of employment for herself and her young lass, (even pewter dishes don't always want scouring) and now and then a twinge of rheumatism”.

A pleasant sight she was in her red cloak pulled over her black bonnet, huddled up in “. . . thick petticoats, gowns, aprons, shawls and cloaks, a weight which it requires the strength of a thresher to walk under—here she is with her square, honest visage, and her loud frank voice; and we hold a pleasant disjointed chat of rheumatisms and early chickens, bad weather, and hats with feathers in them. . . .”

There are many other characters as tempting to quote as that of Mrs. Sally—as full of whims and excellencies and enduring racial charms as Sir Roger de Coverley himself,—such are the Village Apothecary, Jack Hatch, Old Master Green, and The Bird Catcher.

None can write more entertainingly of boys than Miss Mitford—indeed her village children are perhaps the most delightful pictures in her inimitable gallery of rustics. Ruskin, speaking of the distressing lack of happy childhood apparent

in a certain phase of art, says, "I am not able to say with whom, in Britain, the re-action first begins—but certainly not in painting until after Wilkie, in all whose works there is not a single example of a beautiful Scottish boy or girl. I imagine in literature, we may take the *Cottar's Saturday Night* and the 'toddlin' wee things' as the real beginning of child benediction; and I am disposed to assign in England much value to the widely felt, though little acknowledged, influence of an authoress now forgotten—Mary Russell Mitford. Her village children in the Lowlands—in the Highlands, the Lucy Grays and Alice Fells of Wordsworth—brought back to us the hues of Fairyland". . . .

The appearance of *Our Village* was an important event in literary history: Harriet Martineau wrote in her autobiography:—

"In my childhood there was no such thing known, in the works of the day, as 'graphic description'; and most people delighted as much as I did in Mrs. Radcliffe's gorgeous or luscious generalities, just as we admired in picture galleries landscapes all misty and glowing indefinitely with bright colours,—yellow sunrises and purple and crimson sunsets,—because we had no conception of detail like Miss

Austin's in manners, and Miss Mitford's in scenery, or of Millais' and Wilkie's analogous life pictures, or Rosa Bonheur's adventurous *Hayfield at Noon-tide*. Miss Austin had claims to other and greater honours; but she and Miss Mitford deserve no small gratitude for rescuing us from the folly and bad taste of slovenly indefiniteness in delineation. School girls are now taught to draw from objects: but in my time, they merely copied their master's vague and slovenly drawing: and the case was the same with writers and readers. Miss Mitford's tales appealed to a new sense, as it were, in a multitude of minds,—greatly to the amazement of the whole circle of publishers, who had rejected, in her works, as good a bargain as is often offered to publishers."

Christopher North, in his *Noctes Ambrosianae*, said that she excelled Washington Irving in vigorous conception of character, and in the truth of her pictures of English life and manners, and that her writings were pervaded by the spirit of Merry England. He continues, "I dinna wunner at her being able to write sae weel as she does about drawing-rooms wi' sofas and settees, and about the fine folk in them seein' themselves in lookin'-glasses frae top to tae; but what puzzles the like

o' me, is her pictures o' poachers, and tinklers, and pottery-trampers, and ither ne'er-doweels, and o' huts and hovels without riggin by the wayside, and the cottages o' honest puir men, and byres, and barns, and stuckyards; and merry-makin's at winter-ingles, and courtship aneath trees, and at the gable-ends o' farmhouses, atween lads and lasses as laigh in life as the servants in her father's ha'. That's the puzzle and that's the praise. But ae word explains a'—genius—genius—wull a' the metaphizzians in the world ever expound that mysterious monysyllable? ”

§ v

Dramatic Scenes are stories in blank verse, the subjects being principally derived from old ballads and tales. All embody the artificialities noticeable in *Christina*. They were written purely for monetary gain, and except for a few lines here and there, reflect nothing of Miss Mitford's real talents or personality.

§ vi

Mrs. Browning says, “Her *Belford Regis* should probably rank as her best work; it has most power and most character, and it is some-

what less uniformly soft and green than *Our Village* is. If read by snatches, it comes on the mind as the summer air and the sweet hum of rural sounds would float upon the senses through an open window in the country, and leaves with you for the whole day a tradition of fragrance and dew."

As a complete picture of a certain phase of English life in the past *Belford Regis* ranks with the creations of Addison and Goldsmith, Mrs. Gaskell and George Eliot.

We are shown every aspect of existence in a country town during Regency days—for *Belford Regis* is of course Reading, and the author drew largely upon the recollections of her own girlhood.

We see, for instance, the different types of tradesmen and small shop-keepers—one of the most vivid descriptions is that of Mrs. Hollis, the fruiterer, a fitting subject for Franz Hals, ". . . a tall, stout, square, upright figure, surmounted by a pleasant comely face, eyes as black as a sloe, cheeks as round as an apple, and a complexion as ruddy as a peach." This was her costume, "a dark gown, the sleeves reaching just below the elbow, cotton in summer, stuff or merino in winter, with dark mittens to meet the sleeves; a white double muslin handkerchief outside of the gown, and a handsome shawl over that, pinned so as

not to meet in front; a white apron, a muslin cap with a highish formal crown, a plaited muslin border trimmed with narrow edging (I daresay she never wore such a gew-gaw as a bit of net in her life) a plaited *chinnum* to match fastened to the cap at either ear, and a bit of sober coloured satin ribbon pinned round, without bow or any other accompaniment."

Then there was Stephen Lane the butcher, a foundling from the Workhouse, who by his own industry and his marriage with his master's daughter, had amassed a fortune, and who now took a prominent part in the affairs of the town. "He was president of a Smoking Club, a vice-president of half-a-dozen societies where utility and charity come in the shape of a good dinner; was a great man at a Smithfield Cattle Show; an eminent looker-on at the bowling green, which salutary exercise he patronized and promoted by sitting at an open window commanding the scene of action; and a capital performer of glees and catches . . . he is a great patron of the drama, especially the comic drama, and likes no better place than the Stage Box at the Belford Theatre, a niche meant for six which exactly fits him. All fours is his favourite game, and Joe Miller his favourite author."

We are introduced to Mrs. Purvey the confec-

tioner, Peter Jenkins the poulterer, and Mrs. Tomkins the cheese-monger; around all such subjects Miss Mitford weaves a slight story, but the essential charm and entertainment is derived from the realistic presentation of character and *décor*.

The gentlefolk of the town afford numerous delightful descriptions—for instance, the Reverend Josiah Singleton, who was no doubt an excellent prototype of the period, “. . . round, indolent, and rubicund, at peace with himself and all around him, who lives in quiet and plenty in his ample parsonage-house, dispensing with a liberal hand the superfluities of his hospitable table, regular and exact in his conduct, but not so precise as to refuse a Saturday night’s rubber in his own person, and to condemn his parishioners for their game of cricket after service on Sunday afternoons . . . rotund and rosy, ‘a tun of a man’, filling three parts of his roomy equipage; the shovel hat with a rose in it, the very model of orthodoxy, overshadowing his white hairs and placid countenance; his little stunted foot-boy in a purple livery, driving a coach horse as fat as his master.” He rented the first floor of a widow gentlewoman who kept a toy shop, and his parlour was furnished with a Scotch carpet, cane chairs and a Pembroke table; his bedroom with a tent bed, dimity

furniture, and a mahogany chest of drawers. He was a great favourite with the ladies—played whist, quadrille, cassino, backgammon, commerce or lottery tickets—called on them in the morning and drank tea with them in the evening, “. . . in short, when the ladies of Belford (on the husbands setting up a weekly card club at the King’s Arms) resolved to meet on the same night at each others’ houses, Mr. Singleton was, by unanimous consent, the only gentleman admitted to the female co-terie”. In return he invited them to partake of a syllabub, and entertained them with his piping bullfinch, “who executed the ‘Blue Bells of Scotland’ in a manner not to be surpassed by the barrel-organ, by means of which this accomplished bird had been instructed.” The good man became a collector of shells and tulips, and a member of various clubs, and was set down by all as a confirmed old bachelor. However, in the end he was married four times.

The spinsters of the town afford entertaining reading, as do the seasonable festivities which they attended—the assemblies and the archery meetings, the suppers and balls, and the country excursions.

Writing soon after it was published (February, 1835) Miss Mitford says, “I presume that it has succeeded, since all my London correspondents

speak of it as a great success; and the papers, so far as I have seen, prefer it to *Our Village*, finding no other fault than that the picture of life which it exhibits is too bright and sunny. . . . In my opinion it is overloaded with civil notes, and too full of carelessnesses and trifling repetitions, which results, I suppose, from its having been sent up at different times; having been first intended to appear in one volume, then in two, and now turning out three volumes. Nevertheless, I myself prefer it to my other prose works, both as bolder and more various, and deeper in sentiment, and as containing one character (a sort of embodiment of the strong sense and right feeling which I believe to be common in the middling classes, emphatically the people) which appears and reappears in several of the stories giving comfortable proof of the power to carry on a strongly distinguished character through three volumes which, if I do comply (as I suppose I must) with Mr. Bentley's desire for a novel, will be very valuable. This personage, who is neither more nor less than Stephen Law (Lane) the butcher, is the chief favourite of the Duke of Devonshire; for it is remarkable that the very great nobility, the real leaders of fashion, always delight in the simple and the true, and leave the trash called fashionable novels to their would-be imitators."

§ VII

Country Stories appeared in 1837. It is a pleasant little volume of a dozen tales, reminiscent in style and matter of *Our Village*.

§ VIII

Recollections of a Literary Life comprise three volumes of papers dealing with the lives and works of various poets and authors, some famous, some obscure, interspersed with much entertaining autobiography.

As well as writing of Cowley and Herrick, Beaumont and Fletcher and Sir Walter Scott, she brought into prominence such quaint, forgotten characters as Thomas Clare, the labourer poet, Christopher Anstey the author of the *Bath Guide*, and Thomas Holcroft, who wrote *The Road to Ruin* and numerous other popular plays. Such subjects aroused great interest, and in consequence *Holcroft's Memoirs* were reprinted. Much of the writing recalls the style of *Our Village* especially in the chapter entitled *Beaumont and Fletcher*, and in *Samuel Johnson* we find a most delightful fragment of autobiography, describing early days at Alresford, a village wedding, and her first visit to London.

Most of its readers will agree with Mrs. Browning, who, with her usual felicity, wrote, "It's a popular book, with flowers from the '*Village*' laid freshly and brightly between the critical leaves."

§ IX

Ruskin told Miss Mitford that he considered *Atherton* to be one of the sweetest things she had ever written—that he received from it the same kind of refreshment which he derived from lying on the grass in spring—and that he was keeping the succeeding volumes literally for cordials—the most happy and healing when one is weary. . . .

It is a pleasant old-fashioned story about a missing legatee and a mortgaged estate, and the two families at the Great Farm and the Hall afford many quaint pictures of by-gone social life.

Pretty, fifteen year old Katy Bell, of the Great Farm, had been left the half of a miser's fortune, and had agreed to marry Major Delancy of the Hall, and so free the hampered Atherton estates. Katy's governess, Honor Clive (engaged to prepare the former for her future position) had in the past refused to marry the Major, being poor and proud, but finally she proved to be the missing

legatee, her grandmother having aroused a romantic passion in Richard Strange the miser. Honor now joyfully accepted the gallant Major, whom Katy renounced with equal delight, being more than content to return to the happy freedom of the Farm.

The descriptions of Katy's grandmother, Mrs. Warner; of her mother, rosy cheeked, bustling Mrs. Bell, and of Jacob Stokes, the gardener's boy, are in Miss Mitford's happiest style, the account, too, of Katy's home would greatly enhance the popularity of the book with American readers, who never wearied of her picturesque accounts of rustic life.

The sitting room at the Great Farm was no doubt typical of many yeoman dwellings a hundred years ago.

"In the centre was a small Pembroke table of dark mahogany, somewhat rickety; at the end a side-board of the same material, the drawers groaning with stands of spirits, and bottles of home-made wine, the top covered with miscellaneous articles, Mrs. Warner's large Bible, surmounted by a cookery book occupying one corner, while Mrs. Bell's enormous work-baskets and work-bags over-filled the other; a beautiful jar of dried grasses, Katy's property, occupied the other. . . . Two triangular cupboards occupied two op-

posite corners; of which one was so crammed with closely packed glass and china that it was dangerous for any unaccustomed finger to attempt to extricate cup or saucer from the pile; whilst the other was filled to bursting with articles of daily call, tea, sugar, lemons, nutmegs and ginger bread. Fruit at all seasons, and cakes of many denominations, completed the array. No-one could enter that room without tasting the light seed-cake—diet-bread, Mrs. Warner called it—compounded from a family recipe a hundred years old; or the green gooseberry wine, famous as that of Mrs. Primrose, sparkling and effervescent as champagne. It was the very temple of hospitality.

“A side door opened into a hall, which might, perhaps, lay equal claim to that title; a large flagged apartment, with a wide open hearth and a heavy oak table, on which business of eating and drinking was going forward all day long. The materials, it is true, were somewhat different; consisting not of such kickshaws as cake and wine, but of solid beef in its most ponderous form of round and sirloin, massive bacon, and mighty ale. All the comers and goers of the Farm paid a visit to the stone hall; and it may be suspected that they occasionally made an errand for no better purpose. . . .”

Atherton has been called sunlight in suffering.

The conditions under which it was written have already been described, and should not be forgotten when one is reading it.

In a letter to a friend Miss Mitford said, “. . . the scenery (allowing for some little embellishment of the Hall and Park) is true—at least, was so fifty years ago, when my father, mother, and myself went more than once to stay at the Great Farm, whose occupants (a Mrs. Hunt and her daughter) were very distantly related to my maternal grandmother. It was exactly the scene of affluent hospitality which I have described, and Mrs. Hunt was in person a character not unlike Mrs. Bell, whilst her daughter, an elegant woman, bore some resemblance to Mrs. Warner. They drove their close carriage, and Joseph was quite a real person. The name of the village was Lockinge, situated in the midst of the great Berkshire downs, about four miles from Wantage, and quite, I think, as beautiful a scene. The Hall belonged to Mr. Bastard, then M.P. for Devonshire, who, residing in that county, let the Park to Mr. Hunt, and I well remember how I loved to take a book and sit in an old-fashioned, gloomy grotto under a wood-covered bank. The mother and daughter are both dead, her children have settled in America. The last I heard of Lockinge was from the Duke of Devonshire, who came to

see me on his way home from a visit he had been paying to the then occupant of the Hall—I think Sir Harry Martin. I wonder if he recognized the scenery! I only once saw it in the summer, when my father was on the grand jury at Abingdon and left us there; but I was twice or three times there with him for the sake of coursing in the early autumn, and the place has always hung on my memory. The people are of course creations; I find Katy the general favourite; some scold because I did not marry her, but I hate early marriages, and wanted to show a bright, healthy youthfulness, too busy and too happy for the folly and vanity of a premature love; others say it should have been three volumes, but then the secret must have leaked out.”

Of the Tales Miss Mitford herself has said, “They were written, for the most part, for one of those costly and splendid Annuals, which many bought to look at, and few cared to read. That they were composed to match the pictures is hardly a disadvantage, since pictures are often full of suggestions; but that they were called for in furious haste, and were sometimes illustrations of distant ages and distant countries, was hardly favourable to a writer so slow and so home-loving as myself.”

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Certain old-fashioned qualities of style and de-
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scription merely lend an added interest to her books, which bear no trace of the cant and hypocrisy and general dreariness apparent in many contemporary works. Indeed it is difficult to imagine either Miss Mitford or her rosy heroines perusing *Who Shall be Greatest? Which is the Wiser?* and *Lying in all its Branches*.

Redolent of all the happy wholesome things of life, her books possess a lasting appeal; let us then remember her in the apt words of a modern writer, who says "Miss Mitford's name is one of the sweet herbs in the English garden".

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